

A Question of Understanding: Hermeneutics and  
the play of history, distance and dialogue in  
development practice in East Africa

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## Abstract

This thesis is a phenomenology of understanding in the context of development practice in East Africa. It is framed by stories of my life and work, experiences rooted in European traditions and provoked and expanded in encounter with African traditions.

My question began with methods for dealing with poverty and suffering. Even with all my goodwill and education and the might of large institutions behind me, I found myself part of a series of analytical interventions that seemed to make the problem worse. Yet I would like to contribute to a world where people live together well.

This thesis is the story of how I laid siege to this conundrum, working on it from various angles until I saw development intervention for the incoherent prejudice that it was. How could something as co-operative as living well with others be achieved by something so domineering as methodical intervention? Western development consciousness has not noticed that other cultures cannot and will not bear such hubris. So I questioned the notion that a good method (or a good institution, analytical technique or moral code) is the first requirement for fair co-existence. Development, I realised, is conversations that we join, not instructions that we give.

I asked instead how I and others come to agree, a question that many people in my profession have never asked. In a close examination of the way I have come to understandings in my own life, I draw on the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. His philosophical hermeneutics bring together multiple aspects of understanding: its consciousness, historicity, eventfulness, and linguistic and conversational nature. With the help of African thinkers, I gain more perspective—I take part in understandings that are held, provoked and renewed in conversation across time, geography and entire societies.

Through the journey represented by this thesis I have come to understand that understanding speaks the world, its history, diversity and potential. I have come

to know that from understanding comes method, not the other way around. It is an insight that has profound implications for those of us who work in the development field.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis explores how people come to understanding with one another. It is not about methods of understanding, nor is it about understanding why things turn out as they do. It rests on an idea—for which I have Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger to thank—that we are beings whose fundamental state is to understand and to seek understanding. The question then is what kind of understanding and how.

I start by giving a context to the impulse that drove the formulation of the thesis question, before turning to the different frames I considered for structuring the inquiry. I then present the question I am exploring and give some background as to its relevance to me and the people I am working with. I give account of the sources of my philosophical approach and then, in the core chapters of the thesis, I explore the historicity, connectivity and conversational nature of understanding.

To bring the phenomenon into the foreground, I make a close examination of my own experience of coming to understanding over all the years of my life. For a long time I was agitated by misunderstanding between people, as it played out in the political-economic interactions in which I was part and to which I had access in East Africa and in the literature. I will go into more detail as to what I found there a little later, but for the moment I only want to point out that it was not in the objective systems and structures of politics or economics that I found a satisfactory response to my questions about how misunderstanding arises, despite my concerns with the problems I saw it as causing in these arenas. As I searched to understand understanding in others, I became increasingly aware of myself as the interpreter of the understandings and misunderstandings that I encountered. I noted how I was encountering and accounting for the world with theories that I held, developed and discarded. I realised that to comprehend



understanding better I would gain much by looking in minute detail at how my own theory, interest and encounter were co-operating in practice.

In this thesis I tell stories and give narrative, bias and prejudice their due in coming to understandings. I calmed my nervousness about the legitimacy of such a course by trying it, and seeing that stories from experience give weight and truth to the questions I consider. I was further encouraged by reading scholars like Jim Cheney and Greg Sarris, who, drawing insight from indigenous philosophy, show how it is fitting and necessary to tell stories. They demonstrate that what we know is always bound in a historical and environmental narrative (Sarris 1993; Cheney 2005). Similarly, the arguments of Richard Rorty for truths that can only be found in the work of strong poets has resonance with my use of description and re-description in encounter (Rorty 1989; Bergin 2001). You will know when a story is coming because the lines are closer together, the paragraphs are indented and the style of writing changes. It is more descriptive and personal and it has more adjectives. This way of writing is a demonstration of just one of the many things I have learned while writing this thesis: understanding is a dialectic of language.

The narrative that follows looks at understanding in its manifold expressions in my working life, in an arena known broadly as international development. I have come to think of development—as we insiders call it—as a business and a profession, an enterprise, a mission and an exercise in influence. It is a kind of consciousness that guides a way of thinking and acting in the relations between rich and poor, literate and illiterate, industrial and pre-industrial, modern and traditional. It involves notions of progress in economic, technological and organisational realms. But, just as Gadamer urges that the experience of philosophy and art generates '*the most insistent admonition to scientific consciousness to acknowledge its own limits,*' I explore how the experience of philosophical hermeneutics admonishes development consciousness to do the same (Gadamer 1993:133).

## **Confronting exploitation**

I was sitting on a chair in the Sheraton Hotel, Addis Ababa, in December 2004: the Lalibela ballroom, whose soft carpet and glittering chandeliers reminded me of ballrooms at whose entrances I hesitated when I was young; when I wore a green Indian dress and shoes for dancing. The light was dimmed and a screen at one end of the massive room showed an American diplomat talking. She was telling what she saw in Kigali in 1994—the Rwandan genocide. As the film rolled on and the piled bodies of machete-hacked Rwandans filled the screen, patterning the background to interviews with desperate mothers, wild-eyed soldiers, abandoned peace-keepers and plaintive relief workers, I saw people in the audience shifting in their faux-gilded chairs, hands curling around their faces.

The film ended, the lights came up, nobody moved for several minutes. Then a woman stood and told her story, her pain and passion mounting as the history unfolded from her first awareness of discrimination, to abandonment, to slavery, to massacre and miraculous survival, to haunting by the ghosts of her lost children, siblings, husband and parents. And now she works with the government. How often does she go and speak to strangers in African capitals to warn them of the dangers of conflict and complacency? As I listened I thought: this is what I am struggling with, this pain. Real pain, real death generated from words. The way people win power and identity by hurting others; stifling vitality and co-operation. Not just in Africa, in every continent. I tell you this particular story to emphasise how bad it can get and how we are all in some way complicit. From this emerges resolution to understand.

A race riot on a London street, a desiccating famine in North Sudan, a starving 12-year old soldier in South Sudan, a brittle refugee camp on the Kenya-Somalia border, a city smashed by shells, a burning rubbish dump in a Nairobi slum, a fenced off land that once belonged to a proud tribe in Ethiopia, an English girl made mute by discrimination – I was present and I was outraged. I made attempts to find remedies. I had an interest in reparation and adventurous interventionism. But my words of condemnation and mitigating actions did little or nothing to reduce the persistent repetition of these kinds of events. Worse than that, I contributed to their persistence. I was driven to look for an explanation. I came to believe that these outrages stemmed from a profound disrespect within and between societies, generated and sustained by structures of domination and a vocabulary of hierarchy. It was, to me, a failure of *ubuntu* to live up to its most fundamental meaning and promise. *Ubuntu* is a southern African concept conveying, “I see you, we acknowledge each other, we are human” from the

isiXhosa proverb: *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates: 'A human being is a human being through relationship to other human beings' (Marx 2002:552). Its meaning, for me, is that you and I live through understanding with one another. Although it may sometimes seem that each of us is independent, it doesn't take much scrutiny of the realities of life to see that we only exist by virtue of others. If we have no recognition, we fade away, metaphorically and literally. If we have no recognition we risk the possibility of being so worthless that we can be hacked to death with a machete by one of our neighbours. But it is also true that being recognised is no protection against a machete.

People who are poor, demeaned and excluded are the ones who have to insist over and over that there should be an end to the disrespect they deal with every day. People who have to suffer exploitation demand a response, whether practical or moral or both. Exploitation, I believe, begins with disrespect and lack of consideration. It is seldom us who sort out their problems (us, the victorious, the literate, the middle classes, the comfortable ones) even if we wish we were able to be so heroic. By and large, I think we lack the necessary insight. Now when I say 'we' I mean the development professionals, who are my colleagues, and I.

But it is not all bad stories. There is a constant murmur of respect that permeates everywhere. I believe that it is important just to watch and see what people are doing who are reaching true understandings with others about practical matters. I suggest that once we start to do that, we may find that there will be more and more understandings, because it is in the nature of human tradition to expand upon what it has understood. This is one of my claims. In the course of my work I have learned that the processes of reaching understanding are fundamental human attributes for living. Understandings arise not in each individual, but as interplay between them. Thus I am also claiming that coming to understanding and resolving exploitation are linked. We will consider this in the pages that follow.

You might infer from the many books, television programmes, articles, agencies, funds, laws and institutions devoted to preventing exploitation, dealing with

cruelty and abolishing poverty that there is a serious intent in the world to resolve at least the most extreme situations. But Rwanda told us otherwise. There is of course an interest in protecting the richer nations from rebellion and terrorism (the bitter fruits of resentment and confusion), and there are certainly worlds of co-operation, concern and professionalism, but there is also something wrong. We in the development field investigate how people hurt one another, theorise about behaviours and structures, feel hurt when we are blamed, remember our own sufferings, construct elaborate solutions and make attempts to put them into practice. But the results are almost always disappointing.

I want to be part of a world where people live together well, I want to help to find *'a formula for living in the world with others'* which *'acknowledges a world of competing truths and rights to existence'* (Duffield 2005:157). In this doctorate I have been asking if such a formula is possible in the heavily constrained realm of national elite struggles and international development in the countries where I have lived and worked in East Africa. I ask too if, from my location in the world, I can contribute to such a formula. To both I answer yes, it is possible. But my journey has been a strange one. I did not find what I expected to find, a method of resolution and reconciliation through understanding. I found only understanding itself.

Before I go into the stories that frame what I learned, I take you through the different options I considered for making a contribution through research and give an introduction to my questions.

## ***Choosing the frame for this thesis***

I started writing this thesis with confessions of my deficiencies as an interventionist in other people's poverty. I explained my role with pastoralist

leaders in Ethiopia and other African countries<sup>1</sup> as a series of attempts to be a problem solver, backed by hegemonic neo-colonialist tendencies that I was only partially aware of. I described my aristocratic origins with a caustic edge that I had not previously noticed. I then thought, no, this may be an angle, but it is more defensive than useful. It does not help with clarifying the situation and it may even serve to consolidate the problem. Self-victimisation by the oppressed is precisely what I wished to see eradicated, not emulated. Since, in the course of this research, I found that an inquiry into understanding dissipates this kind of self-deprecating behaviour, so I have discarded it as a worn-out and dispiriting mode of being. Having taken this point on board, I felt quite liberated from that corrosive perspective.

I turned then to making an exposé of the failings of the often unbearably selfish development industry, cruel governments and rapacious elites, and likewise I rejected the project as unhelpful. Moaning about the system is second only to self-flagellation when it comes to perpetuating our inertia and our failures to understand. It also justifies the belief that the non-elites are lesser beings in need of patronising guidance or pushing aside while better people put the world to rights.

I changed my introduction once again and headed off on an outline of a handbook for correct understanding of and appropriate political action by leaders of traditional institutions within East Africa's public conversations: its elections, meetings, consultations and national debates. It was to be a rational approach to the prize sought by the leaders and activists with whom I work: political influence and more secure lives. I rejected the handbook approach too, even though I have been writing or implementing handbooks of one sort or another for years, realising that it was once again part of the problem. People cannot generally adopt the advice of handbooks, and if they do they will

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<sup>1</sup> The 10 million or so pastoralists in Ethiopia describe themselves as people who raise livestock. The English doesn't do justice to the complex of social, institutional, religious, environmental, political, economic and ethical terrain that the title means for them. As societies within the Ethiopian polity, they are currently struggling for recognition (Scott-Villiers 2006). Similar efforts are going on in other pastoralist societies in Africa and elsewhere.

understand them in a variety of ways. The results I saw were not agreements but a cacophony of inappropriate social engineering schemes that created yet more trouble.

It also brought into question whether I should prescribe something as immodest as a new approach to public conversation. My experience and reading has led me to believe that human structures are emergent parts of culture and history, and cannot simply be created (Stacey 2001). Although I may occasionally imagine myself capable of god-like delivery of widely beneficial services to the world, and the aid industry of which I am part makes these claims all the time, the unreality of such claims is ever more obvious to me.

I moved then to inquiring into the possibility that there might be a grand theory of cross-cultural agreement, based on recognising and learning from difference and exploring structures and principles of arbitration in context. I would use the literature of multi-culturalism, post-colonialism, action research and facilitation and apply it to my experiences of facilitated dialogue in East Africa. This theory would inform whosoever might be trying to create dialogue between poor people, government officials and managers of development agencies. Once again I came to a halt—cross-cultural agreement is an important idea for my work, but institutionalised agreements are like structures of public conversation, they are emergent properties of people and their cultures. Prior to creating social institutions or theorising multi- or cross-culturalism is the process by which people who have varying cultures, rationalities, institutions and moral histories actually come to agree. It is a process that few of us in my business have ever examined carefully.

To make a contribution, I realise that I cannot prescribe anything at all. It is not recommendations that are wanted, but stimulating truths that wake us up and add something to our lives. These are more likely to be clarifications of how things are, how they appear and how people come to interpret them, rather than suggestions of what to do. Of course even making clarifications is not straightforward – the descriptions have to be based on having heard well and they may be very contextually specific. Although it is tempting to ask what we

should be doing to create an ideal approach to understanding between cultures and between people, I believe it is more useful to consider what is already happening when people strive for it under the influence of history, distance and dialogue. Neither blame, nor blueprints nor idealist theories are going to contribute to an opening of possibility in this difficult arena. What remains, then, is a rigorous accounting of how understanding happens.

## ***What is understanding?***

My main question is the happening of understanding. The kind of understanding I am working with is not, as I first believed, knowledge *of* other things and other people, for example knowledge by the poor of the rich, by the scientist of the technologies or institutions that they wish to use, or by me of someone or something. Rather it is the process of coming to understanding *with* other participants in a conversation about what is specific and concrete. In this, and in much else, my exploration has been profoundly influenced by Gadamer, whose work provides the guiding ideas of the thesis.

For Gadamer, understanding is the coming into language of the world (1993:474). Language is the medium of a relationship of question, answer and agreement between the interpreter(s) and things themselves. He suggests that understanding-as-language is a never-ending process of interpretative change in which the tradition coming forward in language continuously expresses the truth of the subject matter. Understanding is not separate from the subject matter, and as such cannot be fully explored in isolation from it. If the subject matter is the things, people, social and political issues of those involved in development, the implication is to consider where we get our truths from and how we negotiate and account for them.

For a group of pastoralist thinkers I consulted in Ethiopia on the same question, whose tradition is absolutely different from Gadamer's, understanding is a purposeful and rigorous state of engagement with others on the truth of what is there in the world. It is, as they term it, clarity. For both cultures the notion is philosophical.

The presuppositions on which I originally built my question were that understanding was something to be achieved: there were methods of achieving it, people who were good at it and people who were not, and it came into the world as a product of inquiry. None of these presuppositions could really be described as philosophical, they were more scientific or methodological. They set the initial direction of the inquiry and it was only when each one of them had been brought forward and demolished by the provocations of real life that the inquiry managed to make any progress. My presuppositions were strong and their archaeology went deep into my own tradition. I considered it self-evident that understanding was a method.

It was Gadamer who guided me away from looking for a method that you and I might use to overcome ignorance, as opposed to inquiring into the event of understanding. My belief in action had for so long been combined with my desire for instant and admirable results that I found it difficult to accept that a question about what happens might be more useful than a question about how something ought to be done. But I kept faith with the idea of accompanying processes of understanding rather than directing them, and it has proved, I think fruitful, by protecting me from leaping to recommendations and thus maintaining my openness to possibility about what understanding might be.

## **The relevance of the question**

### *Development*

I have been working in international development for 25 years, that is, more than half my life. I am an English woman living and working mostly in East Africa. I have been trying to help change the conditions that seem to be responsible for people's exploitation and suffering. I came into my profession with a hopeful arrogance, a view that 'our' way of doing and seeing things was the result of progress — we had reached a place that everyone else was going to get to eventually. Westerners had simply got there first, not always in admirable ways, but nonetheless we had found something that other people wanted. What exactly that was, I was not sure, but it drew on notions of technology, modernity, order



and an unacknowledged substrate of superiority and power. As Edward Said suggests, Westerners styled themselves as peaceful, liberal and logical and saw foreigners as irrational, degenerate and primitive (Said 2003).

Amartya Sen holds that development is freedom. Being developed, in his mind, means people having political freedoms, economic facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen 1999). According to the World Bank, development is 'a world free of poverty' (World Bank 2009a). There is a broad literature arguing for national and global development as manifest in economic and industrial growth, employment, political and social order, justice, security and environmental sustainability. There are also coruscating critiques that give insight into development's differential benefits and harms, especially as it is interpreted for the purposes of aid. It is capitalist neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism (Kapoor 2002). It is a '*radical intrusive endeavour*' reflecting new imperatives of homeland security and rejuvenating old colonial modes of government (Duffield 2005:141). It is how elites are nourished on resource flows of aid and illegal trade (Bayart 2000). Different kinds of people get different amounts of good from what is called development, even though the underlying unexamined notion is that it is development for all people, even for all the living world.

The United Nations Development Programme describes development as '*a way of enlarging people's choices*' (UNDP 2009b). Its guiding concept is based on Sen's thinking, but it has become *a way* of doing things, rather than something that people achieve (UNDP 2009a). Likewise, in a section of the World Bank website aimed at children there is a statement: '*In a world that is very rich, many people are very poor. Development is about reaching these people and helping them improve their lives*' (World Bank 2009d). The statements underscore the orientation of development agencies towards doing things for poor and oppressed people (or to them) and also points to their tendency to make imprecise claims which cannot be held to account.

Development, as something that happens, is often confused with the notion of aid, which is something that people do to one another. For the World Bank this

means over US\$ 97 billion in loans to developing countries in 2008 (World Bank 2009c:70 & 98). UNDP income exceeded US\$ 5 billion in 2007. In 2002, researchers from Johns Hopkins University estimated operating expenditures in the non-governmental aid sector at US\$ 1.6 trillion. Aid is the bread and butter of tens of thousands of employees of development agencies around the world. Yet it has been cogently argued by some that aid may be the *primary cause* of corruption and economic failure in low-income countries (Moyo 2009).

As far as I am concerned and hope to demonstrate with examples in the pages that follow, 'development' is a consciousness, a way of theorising the world. The paradigm has its deep roots in the great missionary movements of Christianity and Islam as well as those of other religions, but its current form in Africa was, I think, crystallised when western philanthropy and colonial adventurism co-operated with religious proselytising to create the basis of the consciousness and institutions we have today. Defined by its attitudes towards the ignorant, useful and needy poor, development is an expansive endeavour. Much development thinking also appears to also be grounded in the philosophical consciousness of the Enlightenment, whose institutions categorised, individualised and disciplined the masses (Foucault 1995). Empiricism made the objects of knowledge passive, inviting an '*imperial response to the world*' (Cheney 1998:267). Development remains, I think, a way of bringing the unruly into line.

The lack of clarity as to what happens in development and for whom it is beneficial is rooted in confusions between its colonial, missionary, charitable, diplomatic, political and trading orientations. Its shape-shifting nature has confused its advocates, its practitioners, its critics and its objects. It is, I think, important to comprehend the parameters of development consciousness so that we can see its potential and its limits and understand its tendency to objectify and distance those people and places that it pretends to care for.

## *Africa*

Jean Francois Bayart encapsulates a widespread European view of Africa when he says, '*Europeans still have great difficulty in seeing in Africa countries like any others... They relegate Africa to the classic categories of barbarism or the Newspeak of*

*'development,' 'the elimination of poverty' or 'humanitarian aid'* (Bayart 2004). The continent of 53 countries is relentlessly stereotyped as underdeveloped, backward and failing. I used to put it down to low levels of understanding of Africa. And I do mean 'Africa'. The way the rest of the world (Europeans, Arabs, Americans, Asians and others) has dealt with Africa and Africans as a bloc with certain characteristics has had its effect, if only in the adoption and subversion by different Africans of the names they have been called (Fanon 1986; Bayart 1993). I eventually changed my explanation of European behaviour towards Africans to inappropriate understandings *with* Africa. Up to that point, though, I thought that if we outsiders only knew more we would find a way of solving Africa. Living in East Africa for most of my 25 years in the aid business however, I found that Western notions of African barbarism bore little relation to the civilisation and wisdoms of Africa's many peoples. Africa, in the face of enormous difficulties, works, but for an outsider to understand how it works takes some adjustment of paradigm and a willingness to understand with people rather than just about them (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

Chabal and Daloz draw on Geertz in calling culture a 'system of meanings' (Geertz 1973; Chabal and Daloz 2006) Their work suggests that meanings that arise in the complexity of one society are necessarily different to those developed in another. Each person and society has a culture of being and belonging that is in each case his or her own (Chabal 2009). Diverse histories make diverse life-worlds as values, norms, beliefs, expectations and expressions are formed and gradually reformed in the business of daily life and dialogue. The result is that what makes sense to people varies enormously. In agreeing what should be done and why, people are bringing these worlds with them.

In their incisive treatise on our failure to recognise meanings in political analysis Chabal and Daloz observe that the *'realisation that there are other cultural codes leads us not to reconsider our own as one only among many, but to integrate them all into what we claim to be the 'unity of mankind'* (Chabal and Daloz 2006:314). They propose that we should *'stop operating on the assumption that observable diversity is but a veil over fundamentally similar processes... and reject the illusion of paradigmatic ecumenism...'* (327). My experience also brings that unity into question. I have

found no ironing out of historically effected differences between Europe and Africa, or between pastoralists and bureaucrats, or any other pairing of identities; rather there is provocation, and from provocative encounter there is innovation. Establishing agreement between epistemic communities generates potential in ethical, political and practical spheres (Bergin 2001). The question of what is happening when we are reaching understanding in the light of such confrontation becomes vitally important for me.

### *Development professional*

My own interest in how cultural difference works out in coming to understanding also relates to my position as a foreign development professional in Ethiopia, where I have been living until recently. There is a cultural, historical and political distance between me and the people I am working with there. I am a European, white, female, development professional, and they are Ethiopian, African, old, mostly male pastoralists. I am part of a bureaucracy; with my colleagues I devise projects, raise money and run them. The pastoralist elders with whom I engage sit in judgement over disputes, prevail over religious affairs and advise on management of families, herds and pastures that make the prosperity of the tribes. I am a citizen. They are a community. We speak different languages, have different histories, believe different things about what is real and what is sacred and we face different political struggles in life. The words and gestures that pass between the employees of aid agencies and the spokespeople for traditional communities are often misconstrued. Our differences and otherness unfold as a terrain that lies between us as we speak to each other. On a thousand subjects we talk past each other like radios no one is listening to.

In 2000, through a mix of instinct and experience, my colleagues and I stumbled upon a new way of working. We began to aim not for equitable distribution of resources, nor appropriate policies, nor liberal institutions, nor functional schools and clinics (the usual stock of the development trade), but for understanding and communication about these things. We stopped trying to encourage, train or pay people to act in certain acceptable 'developmental' ways, but instead aligned ourselves with their efforts to come to understandings and decisions. I needed to

understand what we were doing and why it was popular with many pastoralists. Some in our profession found our new direction perplexing, even threatening, and we were having difficulty explaining to them what we were doing.

When, at the start of this research in 2002, I examined my motives, I noted that first I had a practical interest in being articulate about my work and making it more coherent. After 18 years in the business, I reckoned that understandings between the players in my game would always be elusive, particularly where cultures were vastly different, but at least I might respond more appropriately to the questions raised by people on whose behalf I was working, as well as to those of my colleagues and critics.

There is also an ethical and normative element to my question. I am exploring understanding as an ontological situation that has implications for living well. As Robert Dostal says, *'the basic posture of anyone in the hermeneutical situation has profound implications for ethics and politics, inasmuch as this posture requires that one always be prepared that the other may be right. The ethic of this hermeneutic is an ethic of respect and trust that calls for solidarity'* (Dostal 2002a:32). I was—I am—outraged by dismissal, mistreatment and exploitation as I see it, and disturbed by the consistent failure of aid and development people to come to understand the true effects of most aid. Apart from the pain it causes, it seems to me to lack insight into the fundamental hermeneutic situation that we cannot live or work well without coming to understandings with others. The withering discrimination that I felt as a young woman growing up in 1960s and '70s Britain has contributed to this stance.

### ***Pastoralist***

When I learned from pastoralists that they too were interested in my inquiry, it gave it a sense of greater relevance and connection.

I have worked alongside pastoralists since I arrived in Africa in 1984 and I have not lost the admiration I first felt when I met a group of Kel Tamachek mounted on camels, dressed in deep blue, looming out of the Sahara desert and asking casually for water in a place so empty the very sky was lonely. Now, I am inviting you to the southern part of Oromia Regional State in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It is a

territory inhabited by perhaps half a million people whose way of life is to herd animals, working with the unpredictable climate. The land is big and sparsely populated. In the rainy season, you can stand at the top of this ridge at Arero and look out across thousands of miles of grey-green vegetation, across the shelving escarpments and plains of Africa's Great Rift Valley to purple mountains that mark the boundaries of territories and the places of rituals and councils. This is just one small part of the enormous pastoralist land that stretches from the base of the East African highlands, across the Sahel, to the sea at Mauritania in the west; and from the deserts of Egypt and Sudan in the North in discontinuous patches along the Rift Valley to the Kalahari and the Namib in the south. Here in Oromia the soils are red in the rocky valleys, yellow on the hilltops and deep black in places. Some years there is no rain at all, other years there is plenty.

I have been having discussions with pastoralist people in Oromia and its neighbouring regions of Somali, Afar, Southern Nations and northern Kenya for seven years as part of my development work. I have been privileged to take part in and benefit from a process in which pastoralist people, in a struggle for recognition, have taken back some of the initiative over the ways of understanding they had lost.

Understanding is such a fundamental of life that it is difficult to imagine losing it and harder still to imagine the unravelling and silence that its loss engenders. But if, as Gadamer suggests, understanding is '*the form of human life*' (Grondin 2002:51), then its loss is, quite literally, death or at least a vulnerability to extreme exploitation and dislocation (Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986). African pastoralist societies, like many other traditional societies that are rubbing up against new cultures, powers and technologies, are changing and differentiating. As new cultures fuse with old ones and communal integrity is threatened, the old thinkers say that they have lost meaning and direction (Heavens 2007). Their lands have become food for hungry developers and politicians, their bodies the property of governments and their old-fashioned ways and co-operation with the earth have been ridiculed.

Here is a group of old pastoralists sitting under a tree and talking about how bad things have become. They put their state of affairs down to the arrival of alien and powerful new cultures - religious, economic and bureaucratic - with which they have had little ability to negotiate or come to understandings.

First Elder: 'People have lost hope, they have surrendered. There is a lot of inertia. There is also a lot of division and disagreement. There may be two people who are talented, who could create a vision, but if they come together they will be on opposing sides because of, for example, religion.'

They are antagonistic. Traditionally people cared for each other but it is also a matter of necessity that they require leadership. The government has lost direction. It is an unclear government system. In one family now there may be Islamic, Boran and Christian religions. It is democracy that spoiled this. You can do what you want because you want to do it. Not one of them sits down to clarify to each other. They just get on with life.’<sup>2</sup>

Second Elder: ‘The culture has changed since government came. People are still making a transition; they have not been completely overrun. The people have not let go of their own culture. There is a tug of war between old and new cultures. In the past if you lied there was a penalty. If you lie now there is no penalty or there is even a reward. It used to be that people who lie were known and they knew themselves and they knew people knew them, so it didn’t cause much damage. Now everyone is lying. The confusion is a mix of two ways; neither is clear to the other. Nobody is paying attention.’

Third Elder: ‘It has been prophesied that on the verge of collapse the system will come back. The people will not be extinct but confused. Nobody will be able to clarify anything. They will start consuming alcohol. They will get lost and those who get lost will start eating enjera<sup>3</sup>. They will be scattered all over the place. Near the end most of them will refuse to accept the truth. Almost at the collapse, somebody knowledgeable will be born. All that was predicted has come true except this last one. This is the one we are looking for.’

My colleagues and I have been organising gatherings of pastoralist people who come together from different parts of East Africa and many other countries to talk. While the first item on most of the delegates’ agendas at these meetings is usually peace (coming to understandings between peoples about co-existence and co-operation), the second item has often turned out to be collaborating for knowledge, recognition and influence. The gatherings, which take place in the open air, in places where pastoralists say they feel most at home, give a taste of new understandings. People taking part say they have learned more about who they are, in relation to others like themselves. Leaders have emerged who have stimulated people to organise and take action on the debates and emotions that burn within their communities – issues like loss of land, political exploitation and violent conflict, and emotions like fear and impotence. I will go into more details

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation notes, Yaballo, Ethiopia 4/12/07

<sup>3</sup> A staple bread from the highlands of Ethiopia

on these gatherings and what they may tell us about coming to understanding in later chapters.

Importantly for the relevance of this thesis, pastoralist leaders I have been talking to consider understanding to be a priority. Here, for example are Borana historian Borbor Bulle's words: *'Many pastoralist leaders, and the people, say that the meetings are helping people clarify to themselves a lot of things. ... There is a lot of opportunity when elders meet and discuss during coffee ceremony every morning. They share understanding. Before this new understanding was established, people had lost hope. With this new understanding, the debate is alive again.'*<sup>4</sup>

I interpret their interest as being to rebuild their understanding of themselves so that they can rebuild their world, protect themselves from exploitation, knit together the fragmenting elements of their societies and deal better with others. In the question of understanding, then, we have found an area of inquiry that is salient to each of us – each for our own reasons.

## **Is there an art of understanding?**

I have long wanted to know if it is possible to have a hermeneutic attitude, one in which provisional judgements simmering from one conversation become available to another with increasing intensity. The term hermeneutics is drawn from the Greek, *hermeneuō*, meaning translation or interpretation. Aristotle deploys the word *hermeneias* (interpretation) to consider the relationship between language and logic, and Gadamer explains it as the situation and event of understanding - *'the original characteristic of being of human life itself'* (Gadamer 1993:259). But Gadamer also speaks of an 'art of understanding' which is not so much a skilled procedure or discipline, but a consciousness that is hermeneutic – recognising the ever changing historically affected nature of things. *'Hermeneutics demands that a conscious application be brought to bear on the living praxis of understanding'* he says in a reply to his critics — it is this that makes critical review possible (Gadamer 1990:282; Dostal 2002a:10). Can deliberate scholarship and inquiry-in-action weave encounters and questions into ever broader circles of



understanding? For pastoralists engaging in public negotiations in Ethiopia, for people in my business who want to do things differently, I have been asking if there is an art of developing reflective and critical consciousness and pursuing questions in a disciplined fashion so that they yield ever more useful layers of understanding and ever wider debates. This is the terrain of my subsidiary question and its direction points towards the praxis and habits of living with hermeneutical consciousness.

I am now content (within the limits of contentedness set by a hermeneutic attitude) that Gadamer is right to insist that understanding, as a life-sustaining element of being human, is not an action, but a phenomenon that comes about (Gadamer 1977:18). Nonetheless I look at the conditions that create variations in the quality and flow of understanding. How these conditions arise and whether they can be acted upon in any deliberate way is, I think, a valid question. I hope to demonstrate that, while coming to understanding is something that largely happens to us without our having a great deal of choice about *what* we understand, there are patterns of thought and behaviour that widen the openings for understanding and make the instances of coming to understanding with others more frequent and comprehensive. It is praxis, a way of being and behaving, which changes with experience and attention. I think that for each of us, for each society, there will be practices that increase the intensity of understanding and they will differ from one to another.

I will go on to clarify further the roots and specificity of the question addressed by this thesis, how we come to understandings with one another about matters of mutual concern, in the following chapters. As Gadamer has demonstrated, and I hope to put into context through my own examples and experience, having and working out a question is a necessary part of the phenomenon of understanding. The way in which I have attempted to answer it is therefore both the subject and the method of this inquiry. In the next chapter I turn to the method and philosophical approach of the inquiry.

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## Chapter 2 - Research Concepts and Methods

In this chapter I outline the theoretical foundations and methods of the inquiry. I start with a brief introduction to the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer on the subject of philosophical hermeneutics, the happening of understanding in practice. I have engaged with his masterwork *Truth and Method* throughout this study (Gadamer 1993)<sup>5</sup>. I then introduce phenomenology, a philosophy of experience and consciousness, the principles of which underpin my method of action research. I give an explanation of the use of stories from my own experience as the ground for exploring the question of understanding.

### ***Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics***

*'hermeneutics is not a doctrine of methods for the humanities and social sciences but rather a basic insight into what thinking and knowing mean for human beings in their practical life' (Gadamer 2004:5).*

In this section I give an initial outline of the philosophy of the twentieth century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and explain how his work is relevant to my context and how he has guided my research. In 1960, Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, a detailed philosophical inquiry into the hermeneutical situation and the nature of understanding. It was not published in English until 1975. Even now his work remains less widely known than that of other philosophers of his age, perhaps because his work devalues assertion and promotes dialogue, which gives it a vagueness and lack of finality that for him is deliberate and for others lacks the certainty that our culture has come to admire (Moran 2000:285).

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<sup>5</sup> From now on I will use (TM #) to refer to the relevant page in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition 1993, Sheed and Ward, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall.

Born in Germany in 1900, he lived through the entire century. As a young man he attended Husserl's and Heidegger's lectures and seminars. He was a contemporary of Hannah Arendt and he engaged with Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida and Karl Apel (Dostal 2002b; Moran and Mooney 2002). His work fused phenomenology, hermeneutics and classical philosophy with what I think is beautiful consistency. Insisting on the essential role of tradition in all human understanding, he has been censured for failing to recognise the imprisoning effects of tradition and the need for emancipatory dialogue. He has also been accused of being overly critical of the methods of the sciences (Ormiston and Schrift 1990).

The central conversation of my thesis is with understanding as expressed in Gadamer's writings. I have used his ideas to frame and inform an inquiry into how understanding happens with pastoralists, government officials and development professionals in Ethiopia. While Gadamer concentrates in *Truth and Method* mainly on the relationship between a reader and the subject through a 'traditional or eminent text', I pay attention to conversation – the engagement between people and their subject matter when they are talking to one another. In most respects, as Gadamer himself says, these two hermeneutic situations are the same, even though in a conversation between two people the possibility of clarification of the thing being discussed multiplies the effect: '*in a successful conversation they [the participants] both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were*' (TM 378).

In this section I lay out five aspects of Gadamer's work that have proved central to my own exploration. I consider first his warnings about the limits of scientific method and relate them to the efforts I and others make to be methodical in our development work. Exploring Gadamer's thought on the nature and conditions of insight I then look at his concepts of historicity, the generative aspects of prejudice and the primacy of the question and its qualities of openness. In struggling with the problem of an art of understanding, Gadamer's ideas of openness provide a

potential resolution for me. I spend a little time on openness here to lay the ground for an investigation into what it means in my own experience and practice in East Africa. Finally I make use of Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons: the event and adventure of comprehension and connection. At the end of this series of short introductions I point to how each of these five areas shape the structure of the thesis.

## Scientific method

At the end of *Truth and Method* Gadamer notes that '*in a time when science penetrates further and further into social practice, science can fulfil its social function only when it acknowledges its own limits and the conditions placed on its freedom to manoeuvre. Philosophy must make this clear to an age credulous about science to the point of superstition. On just this depends the fact that the tension between truth and method has an inescapable currency*' (TM 552). As I see it, Gadamer rejects the dominant application of methods, used so fruitfully in the physical sciences, to the purposes of life experience, aesthetics and human society. He is concerned that the methods of the physical sciences have been carried beyond their natural territory when they attempt to account for aspects of truth for which they are unsuited. The search for a scientifically respectable methodology of hermeneutics led to a misconception of the nature of understanding. It became for a while an objective result of inspection, rather than an event of living (Lawn 2006:12) (TM 241). Gadamer made a lifelong effort to wrest it back to philosophy.

Gadamer goes on to explain, that while there are arts, techniques and talents involved in the dialogues that are essential to understanding, it is simultaneously true that '*history co-determines the consciousness of the person who understands.*' However much we might try to control the process, what is already understood is already speaking for itself (TM 567). We do not, for example, really 'conduct' genuine conversations, rather the conduct of the conversation lies mostly outside the will of its participants (TM 383). So while we are players in the game of understanding, we are also played by it.

The methods of the physical sciences have colonized and partially obscured the territories of experiential. I take note when Gadamer points out that methods appropriate to the rationalist sciences immunize *'against the experience of common sense and the experience one gains in living'* when they are uncritically expanded into contexts such as the political sphere (TM 555). By common sense, I believe that he means not only a generally held understanding of what is, what works and what matters, but also the sense we have of community and co-operation.

In Ethiopia, an aid-dependent country, government and foreign donor officials will often tell you that they are looking for an appropriate method that will allow them to give their aid and make their policies on the basis of a complete analysis of situations of poverty, economic inadequacy and social injustice. This is development as it is projected in websites, programme plans and meetings such as those of the World Bank and numerous other large organisations – take for example the plan for the \$650 million contribution to Ethiopia's public services (World Bank 2009b). There is little recognition that the parameters of what is measured and corrected are primarily defined by the history of those who do the measuring and correcting. Officials describe how their efforts are undermined by annoyances of practice and politics and the intransigence and backwardness of certain cultures with which they barely communicate. In Ethiopia, as plans and policies come up against ever more perplexing obstacles, as relations between different groups of people become ever more tense, and as our own bureaucratisation intensifies in response to our failures, I find that our analyses seem less and less able to generate coherent and effective responses.

Gadamer's views on method are relevant both to the way I have conducted this inquiry and the way I and my colleagues go about our work. Even if hermeneutics are always at play, we have tried to mask hermeneutic consciousness with a scientific one. In this thesis I will contend that our own search in the development sector for a legitimate scientific method of analysis and intervention has distorted our ability to come to common sense understandings that might just solve the problems we are concerned with.

## Historically effected consciousness

We find ourselves in a given tradition, says Gadamer. That tradition, including all that has happened in our own lives, all our environment, all our history, all our language is radically finite (TM 301). It is the ground and hinterland from which we come to understandings with others. We are each possessed by our tradition to the extent that all our thoughts and gestures are in a language that is made possible by it, and all our physical nature is the outcome of it. Thus we always *'already possess an orientation toward, and language for, that which we are trying to understand'* (Warnke 2003:107).

Our historicity, our being beings that are the product of history, determines our consciousness and *'it does so beyond any possible knowledge of this domination'* (TM xxiv). Gadamer claims that the limitations of tradition and prejudice are not obstacles to, but the foundations of understanding. Our prejudgments and concerns anchor what would otherwise be an inchoate infinity of possible perceptions. He uses Husserl's notion of a horizon to explain its possibilities for expansion:

*'Every finite present has its limitation. We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of "horizon." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded'* (TM 302).

Gadamer intimates that the western idea of progress may have led us to forget the role of tradition in all that we think, speak and are: *'though the will of man is more than ever intensifying its criticism of what has gone before to the point of becoming utopian or eschatological consciousness, the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real'* (TM xxxviii). He means by this, I think, that the task of hermeneutic

philosophy is to keep us acquainted with the vitality of tradition in our lives. Hermeneutic consciousness gives us the humility to allow what has gone before, what we are now, what we encounter and what we will be, to all be true and simultaneously active. We accept that the truths that we work out with others grow from where we have come from in ways suitable to their time and place. An obsession with progress, brought on by the successes of technological sciences and a sense that what is past must be inferior, is in danger of distorting our appreciation of truth and reducing the scope of our insight.

As we become conscious of our situation of historicity and that of everyone and everything else, we become aware of contingency (Warnke 2003:108). If we trace our history, as you will see that I do as part of this inquiry, we will understand it only '*from the position of being already constituted by it*' (*ibid*: 108). The exercise gives us awareness of how history is present with us through the culture, language and environment that is ours. We may then realise that our understanding will always be partial and never objective, and other people will have quite different understandings with perfectly good reasons for them. If our epistemology suggests that we can know all of the truth, then we should suspect it of overstepping its capabilities. We can instead, as Georgia Warnke suggests, '*be open to the possibility that we might change our ways of thinking about the world, our situation and ourselves*' (*ibid*: 109). It means that there are an infinite number of other horizons of understanding out there that we can engage with. The concept opens us to the idea of truly productive conversation with the other and an infinite but grounded future. It is not about making truth relative, but acknowledging that what is true is the thing itself as it is presenting itself, and even with all the rigour we can muster, each of us expresses that truth in slightly different ways every time we express it. There is no standing outside this situation.

When my pastoralist friends, in their own historically effected consciousness, talk of rain at the same level of categorisation as peace, when they repeat the sayings of a prophet, when they know time by the moon, talk of land as if it is as immune from sale as air, or tell me episodes of history marked by generational councils, I notice that I struggle to integrate these versions of reality into my own way of



considering rain, peace, spirit, time, land or history. Likewise government officials from the Ethiopian highlands understand these matters in their own way. They belong to a culture quite different from the culture of the more recently annexed pastoralist lowlands. These differences are not trivial, because they lay the foundation for a series of often perplexing and dangerous disagreements.

What generates the impulse for the state of historicity to reach beyond itself? Thinking on historically effected consciousness and the way it can isolate has fundamental application to my situation within the Ethiopian development scene. Productive conversations relating to issues of life and society have not yet taken place on any scale in the development sector. For me and for the pastoralists with whom I speak, the possibility of productive conversation is an exciting one, especially if it can be extended from internal debates to include neighbouring communities, politicians, government and donor officials, scholars and business people with whom the pastoralists want to have a dialogue. At the moment it seems that our worlds are separate. When we speak to each other it is as if words between us all fall from our mouths into battle trenches of defensive incomprehension and disrespect.

## **Prejudice**

The historical, cultural and normative meanings that we bring to encounters provide the starting point for active hermeneutic interpretation. Gadamer calls this prejudice. He notes that the word prejudice only came to take on its current pejorative connotation with the ideas of the Enlightenment, when European scientists, philosophers and historians sought freedom from any prejudgment through the application of precise methods. But prejudice, says Gadamer, simply means that which we have already judged to be the case and it is neither negative nor positive in itself but a given (TM 270). Prejudice is a standpoint from which we see something, *'not a point from which we are necessarily blinded'* (Wachterhauser 2002:72).

Just as gravity limits the height we can jump, but does not imprison us entirely, instead stimulating us to leap and run, so the limitations of thinking within a

given language or operating within a cultural and normative horizon — think perhaps of modernity or tradition, Europe or Africa— are starting points rather than constraints. There is always something emerging out of and beyond our language and culture, generated by anticipation and encounter with what is real. My history is reinterpreted from the ever changing position of my present, which in turn changes the direction and application of my insight.

We often claim that, in the interests of neutrality or learning, we are putting prejudice aside. But that would be impossible. It would mean trying to exclude that *‘which alone makes understanding possible... To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us’* (TM 397). Prejudice is the ground from which questions arise and possibilities for understanding emerge. It offers points of reference for creating new meanings and expanding old ones, and creates a direction for the conversation that follows (TM 295). The process begins when we are addressed and interplay begins as our own prejudice is brought into question at the same time as we question what we are hearing or otherwise encountering. Questions stimulate and form the framework of the understanding that emerges. *‘Fore-grounding a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment’* (TM 299).

For Gadamer understanding cannot be confirmation of opinions, it must involve an expansion to a wider horizon. *‘How, then, can the admission of ignorance and questioning emerge?’* he asks (TM 366). He answers this in two ways, first in a consideration of the conditions of being open to understanding; second in a consideration of the kind of dialogue that keeps the questions alive so that the matters are kept in play until everyone is satisfied. He talks of the primacy of conversation, *‘the art of forming concepts through working out common meaning’* (TM 368).

Though we talk about listening in the development field, we actually do very little of it and instead trade in opinions and promises. In my experience it is usual for professionals in my business to be satisfied with confirmation of their opinions rather than allowing for something new. We achieve professional status by

knowing and being knowing, not by asking endless open questions (Chambers 1997). We claim that we already know, or have found out, and are rewarded for it. Of course, there is a wide variety of views as to what is going on in development, but there is a common tendency towards making claims that we are supposed to be closer to the truth than our predecessors managed to be. We are, as Gadamer says, in a difficult position:

*'By understanding the other, by claiming to know him, one robs his claims of their legitimacy. In particular, the dialectic of charitable or welfare work operates in this way, penetrating all relationships between men as a reflective form of the effort to dominate. The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance. We are familiar with this from the teacher-pupil relationship, an authoritative form of welfare work' (TM 360).*

## Encounter and questioning

In the foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer says, *'the experience of the Thou ... manifests the paradox that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is "understood"' (TM xxxv)*. The capitalised "Thou" means another which relates itself to me (TM 358). In concentrating on the encounter with a historical text, whose speaker is from a place impossibly distant from where the reader is now, Gadamer emphasises that it is the otherness of the speaker that enables the text to tell us something. He emphasises too, our continuity with the other in terms of participating in the same world. He notes from time to time in his writings (more and more in his later works) that the same is applicable to conversations and encounters between people, even where the differences are not so apparently unbridgeable. The otherness and connectedness of the Thou are of equal importance in the phenomenon of understanding (TM 358-60).

Examining this process of encounter, Gadamer goes on to say that interpretation of what is there is modified by the degree and nature of the interpreter's openness, even as it is bounded by the possibilities of vocabulary and expectations which emerge from culture, history and purpose. Georgia Warnke

has summarised from his text three conditions for coming to understanding that together can be described as openness. The first is that we are prepared for the other to tell us something – we recognise that it is *other*; the second that we assume the parts of what is said will be consistent with the whole of what is said, so that when we find contradictions we question them and make adjustments to our understanding; and the third, that what we are hearing could be true: *'something different and more satisfying than what we already believe'* (Warnke 2003:111-2). It is from these conditions that questions and dialogue arise.

Just as I appreciate the possibility of your words being right, I must also consider, for the moment, that my version of things might be invalid, or incomplete, so I ask a question (TM 299). In a true dialogue, we both bring our prejudices into play together (TM 298-9). Foregrounding my own prejudice is not something I simply do; rather it is provoked and put at risk by the other and affected by my epistemological stance. Openness arises, it seems, with the wisdom of experience, as provocation becomes something to be expected.

*'The perfection of experience, the perfect form of what we call 'experienced' does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. ... The dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself'* (TM 355).

Even when a new understanding begins by offering liberating or strengthening insights, as with Freire's emancipatory programme of 'conscientisation' (Freire 1972), the new understanding can become a constricting opinion if openness is not preserved. When an opinion, however it was initially expansive, is reinforced by an environment in which being opinionated is strongly valorised, or in which powers or identity accrue to the holders of the opinion, it can become positively ossifying. Then the hermeneutical process of learning falters.

What is it that keeps openness open? How is it that the truly experienced person will always be open to new experience, because that is what he or she has learned about living? Openness is the art of questioning, says Gadamer: *'the art of questioning is the art of questioning even further, - i.e., the art of thinking. It is called*

*dialectic, because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue'* (TM 367). While openness to understanding is clearly an ordinary part of being animate and in our case human, I think there are also degrees of achievement related to how we have cultivated our talents, as individuals and societies. Openness is maintained by genuine conversation, whether spoken or silent, gesture, voice, music, image or text; for it is conversation that sustains the interplay of question and answer (Marshall 2004:123).

*'We have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the "art" of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possesses this art will himself search for everything in favour of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter)* (TM 367).

In development and administrative bureaucracies with which I have engaged there is a risk that conditions of openness will fail and the art of questioning die. In situations where autocratic, economic or bureaucratic rule have replaced communicative agreement to an excessive degree, questions become useless and dialogues stop happening. I have experienced my industry's low tolerance for possibility or mutability. I have found myself having to say that what I am going to do is right and what I have done is right. I have planned and reported in a knowing fashion. Recognition of the autonomy of the other is almost against our principles; I believe that we want everyone to be part of one developmental paradigm. While we often hire in consultants to analyse and recommend, it is usual for any contradictions that emerge to be ignored in a rush for new plans, resources and results (Chambers 1995). The notion that the other, especially the poor and voiceless other, embodies a truth that will enhance our own is seldom recognised, given the power differentials that our wealth and positioning bring us (Chambers 1997).

## Fusion of horizons

We are each of us an element of a broad and complex motion of time, making what Gadamer calls a single world horizon of all that has ever been and all that is (TM 245). To live we seek to understand things, we distinguish and connect, and in encounter we project that each of us, each culture, each time in history, each thing that we want to understand and take part in, has a horizon of its own effective history. But these horizons are never truly closed to one another and they are always in motion. *'Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction'* (TM 304).

The hermeneutic task, Gadamer suggests, consists in not covering up the tension between self and other, past and present or one culture and another by *'attempting a naïve assimilation, but consciously bringing it out'* (TM 306). When we encounter the other we do not transpose ourselves into it, her or him, but make ourselves available. This is neither empathy nor subordinating ourselves. We keep a sense of ourselves and also let the other's meaning be heard (TM 305). But while there is alienation there is also a unity which was and is always there. There is no horizon of the present without a horizon of the past, and there is no horizon of myself here and now, without all the horizons of all the others in the world: *'understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves'* (TM 306). It is a constant business of knitting the distinctions of the world together.

In the fusion of horizons we each assimilate understanding to ourselves and we confirm together the unity of our existence. Each time this happens it is a new event, because each time the making of sense is renewed in a new concrete situation. The moment of interpretation is rooted and influenced by historicity, but is also entirely unique and new. Its limitation is that it has to fit with the speaker's meaning, the listener's prejudice and questions and the moment and place in which it is happening. Each event of effective understanding is a fusion of cultures.

As the historical and cultural horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. This, Gadamer says, is *'the problem of application that exists in all understanding'* (TM 307). By application, he means not that I apply my understanding to something, but that something applies to me. In the early tradition of hermeneutics, understanding, interpretation and application were called *'subtilitas'* – subtleties. They were not so much *'methods we have at our disposal than... talents requiring particular finesse of mind'* (TM 307). Gadamer reminds us that we cannot fix and prescribe processes that are essentially alive. Application suggests that something in the world directs what is understood and is appreciated from the ground of prior understanding. It is the connectivity and unity of understanding with the world and the hermeneutic consciousness that Gadamer speaks of. This consciousness is a life-sustaining capability of dialogue and judgment which we all possess, but recognise to a greater or lesser extent.

I suggest that hermeneutic consciousness is barely appreciated among we who work on social development. My own experience of pre-packaging what I encountered before I encountered it, as being caused by this or that, being useful or useless, meaning this or that, is just one example. This barrier between our own ideas and the actualities of things and people we are dealing with is one of the major concerns of this thesis. It seems reasonable to look for ways of enhancing our talents at noticing and making things noticeable. Subtlety can perhaps be refined so that understanding is improved and openness maintained. I will look at how the hermeneutic consciousness is realised and consider whether it is only what happens to us by chance. Gadamer himself suggests that cultivation is possible. Based on the forward-directed powers of understanding, we recognise that language brings ideas that reach other people. Thus we hold ourselves back from opinion to allow ourselves to recognise the others' views. We recognise the autonomy of one other as well as the autonomy of the self in interaction with one another. *'In the end this is one of the basic conditions for human beings to be able to live together at all in a human way'* (Gadamer 2004:11).

## Practical hermeneutics

Gadamer is always at pains to emphasise that hermeneutics is not a practice, but it is practical. His synthesis of the determinacy of historically effected consciousness and the opportunities of prejudice, conversation and fusion has guided the direction of my inquiry. Since I first started to read Gadamer in 2005, along with scholars of the school of modern hermeneutics such as Warnke, Dostal and Marshall, I have adopted the philosophy as I understand it as a prejudice of my own. I have listened, read, written and taken part in conversations and formal dialogues in which hermeneutic consciousness has become ever more insistent for me. Once a consciousness is in operation it seems, (be it historical, developmental, hermeneutic, scientific or other), it begins to have an active effect on understanding.

In this thesis I explore the tension between truth and method and between hermeneutic and development consciousness across the twenty-five years of my working life. I begin in chapter 3 with the point of departure: a provocation of acute misunderstanding for a young foreigner in Sudan. I embark on an investigation into the history of that misunderstanding within my own education and culture, and put the concept of historicity under scrutiny. In chapter 4, I describe a series of experiences of development work in East Africa and demonstrate how prejudice and vagueness close off opportunities for understanding. I note how they are challenged by their own inconsistencies and failure to deliver desired results. In response to failure, I then turn to the promises of development theory and practice, and consider in chapter 5 the limits of theorisation for coming to understandings with others. In examining the kind of consciousness that is prevalent in my field, I ask to what extent Gadamer's conditions of openness are present. Chapter 6 looks at the unfolding of understanding in the day-to-day experience of being together with others trying to get development right, and chapter 7 explores modes of listening in dialogue and conversation that arose when I jettisoned the idea of welfare work and adopted something like a hermeneutic approach to my work. In the concluding chapter 8, I reach an accommodation between truth and method which is something of a point of arrival and a point of departure for new questions. I



review what I have learned about method, consciousness and understanding and I consider the implications for me and for people with an interest in development.

I now turn to the method that I have used to collect together and account for the material and ideas that make up this narrative. I begin with its basis in phenomenology, a philosophical approach that underscores the organisation of Gadamer's own investigation. It is, as Gadamer puts it, a critique of objectivity and a form of research that brings subjectivity in (TM 243 & 245).

## **Phenomenology**

The term phenomenology combines the Greek words *phainomenon* (φαῖνόμενον) and *logos* (λόγος) – letting the thing speak (Heidegger 2008:58-9). *'It signifies the activity of giving an account, giving a logos of various phenomena, of the various ways in which things can appear'* (Sokolowski 2000:13). Things are evidenced, (successfully presented) rather than proved (*ibid* 164). It is *'a style of philosophising that attempts to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer'* (Moran 2000:4).

Edmund Husserl initiated the phenomenological movement in European philosophy at the start of the twentieth century. Drawing on his teacher Brentano and refuting the primacy of mind over matter epitomised by Descartes and Hume, he put forward a radical perspective on knowledge and consciousness based on the combined perceptual and functional aspects of *'things themselves'* (*ibid* 5). Whereas Descartes argues for rational judgment as the source of understanding and Hume for the natural role of experience, the phenomenologists argue for the primacy of the thing itself in its expression in sense and language. Scientific or theoretical insight depends first on an original situation of practical concerned encounter and accessing things as they are while minimising the role of consciousness is an abstraction, only possible in theory (*ibid* 231-233). Likewise considering all to be consciousness and reality to be out of reach is equally abstract. Phenomenology suggests that the distancing of *'objectivity'* is a willed exercise, which is useful when its limits are recognised, but

it is not the whole of truth. Husserl, for instance, points out that consciousness is indivisible from the things that it intends. He developed a method of getting at the things themselves, the '*eidetic reduction*', which involves repeated description of every available aspect, dimension, profile and moment of that thing as it appears to consciousness, repeatedly clearing away that which is not essential and that which is assumption (Sokolowski 2000; Ladkin 2005).

Husserl's work was taken up by a number of philosophers, including Heidegger and Gadamer, Sartre, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty and it influenced many more, including the American pragmatists. All of these worked in different ways on eradicating the dislocation of mind and the things of the world. Ladkin draws out three threads which are broadly common to these different philosophers and which are applicable to my research. Each emphasises the day-to-day world as the source of understanding. Following from this, they investigate experience in the world as the locus of understanding and subjectivity in its contribution to truth and meaning (Ladkin 2005:112).

These philosophers drew on and developed Husserl's ideas, and in using phenomenology for their own purposes they made the idea of phenomenology itself more realistic and pragmatic. While revolutionary in its spirited resistance to the Enlightenment idea that a dissecting objective stance was a realistic possibility, Husserl's work suffered from its own lack of realism. His attempts to '*suspend our beliefs*' in order to see the thing more clearly are just that, attempts (Sokolowski 2000:49). Many, including his one-time assistant Martin Heidegger, criticised the suggestion that it was possible to get to the essential nature of a thing by 'bracketing' all that was extraneous. Heidegger criticised Husserl for underemphasising the contingent nature of the hermeneutic situation, referencing three elements of being that are always affecting phenomena as we let them express themselves: '*facticity*' (or *historicity*), the state of being thrown into and effected by history; *temporality*, the dynamic and projective effect of living as time; and *interpretation*, the expression of the thing in the light of facticity and temporality (Moran 2000:20). Getting at the essential is always already getting at it with facticity, temporality and interpretation says Heidegger. That means,

explains Moran, that *'Husserl's project of pure description becomes impossible if description is not situated inside a radically historicised hermeneutics'* (ibid 85).

For Heidegger, understanding is grounded in our practical engagements with things. Because beings are concerned with things in the world and with one another, their comportment towards one another is always interpretative. The phenomenal thing is, in Heidegger's parlance, 'ready to hand,' precisely because each of us is concerned with it, and it is in this way that each of us understands it. The thing is insistent as it addresses itself to each of our concerns. Heidegger transforms phenomenology by insisting that it is hermeneutic. When an expression becomes an assertion about something, he says, it hardens, no longer having the fluidity of its relation to the thing itself. Phenomenology, conversely, is a mode of *'grasping and explicating phenomena in a way which is original and intuitive'* but which is also *'directly opposed to the naïveté of a haphazard, 'immediate', and unreflective 'beholding''* (Heidegger 2008:61).

Phenomenology opens up new vistas previously obscured by Enlightenment concepts of objectivity and the efforts of logic to avoid the bias of individual perspective. It does not assume only a world of things that can be made objective by science, but a life-world in which we are all immersed and which defines all our modes of understanding, including our ability to conceive of things objectively for our subjective concerns. Heidegger notes that all understanding is understanding of something, by someone in a world in which there are other people too (ibid 154). He offers the possibility of a new kind of research which is beyond the objective, because: *'understanding always pertains to the whole basic state of Being-in-the-world'* (ibid 184). Reason and Bradbury's term 'participative' involves a similar thought. It suggests that we co-author understanding in the world. For them, adopting a participatory worldview is not a matter of constructing a fiction or being relativist, but an expression of our interaction with real phenomena (Reason and Bradbury 2001b:6-8). We generate truth about something from and with one another in the encounters of conversation, inquiry and the world-embracing effects of being. Participation is an ontological state of affairs and ways of knowing are likewise participative (Heron and Reason 1997).

Pursuing this idea in order to find a way of researching, Ladkin suggests that what is important to phenomenological work is how we account for the locatedness of what we express (2005:123). Accounting is an attempt at clarity rather than an exercise of bracketing or objectivity. It means making something more intelligible for another and for oneself by embracing it in its historical and communal meaning and making it transparent in those terms. Its potential lies in an expression that has common sense (TM 27), meaning (Ladkin 2005:123), plausibility (Chabal & Daloz 2006:4), and which is pragmatic (Rorty 1999: xxv), practical and action-centred (Reason and Bradbury 2001b:8; Reason and Torbert 2001), edifying (Cheney 2005:102) and fitting (Goodman and Elgin 1988:158).

I have given here a configuration of phenomenology that works for my current purpose of exploring how people come to understandings. I have not tried to explicate the method and philosophy as a whole and in all its variations. I am drawn to the suggestion that it is the life-world that generates understanding, and that phenomena are themselves insistent and demanding, rather than objects of scientific investigation. What I experience as the things themselves is not my consciousness and their objectivity, but our belonging to each other. As I converse with others about these things, we meet them and each other in our curiosity and concern and our various accountings create fusions of understanding.

### **The relevance of phenomenology to my inquiry**

I am aware that my attraction to phenomenology is rooted in my western European culture. My culture has distanced the 'thing' from consciousness, as well as one person from another, ruptures that demand to be healed. Other cultures have not made such divisions and might not see the background to my concern. Native American philosophy, for instance, might suggest that practices are more important than things, given its sense of how living beings bring the world into being through comportment (Cheney and Weston 1999). Their ontology emerges from their ethical practices of respect for what they encounter. My culture has given me doubt and disrespect. My use of phenomenology, in attempting to bring back together parts of my world that had been split apart by

excessive application of science and administration, is a move towards ethical practice and a new and appropriate ontology.

Why would a phenomenological approach be useful in my inquiry? The modern consciousness that I express in my development work suggests that I can and should be asserting truths and manipulating things and people. Yet this conception affects my accounting of the things that I try to know and my interaction with the people that I meet. Layers of theory seem to encrust themselves like salts on my judgements and questions. Their epistemology often creates a barrier between me and the world rather than always opening it to understanding. I take up ideas that have been created at other times and in other places, ideas that have been extemporised, generalised, rationalised, rephrased and clichéd and life's touch shrinks away from thought.

Within my own culture I seldom noticed theoretical encrustations, or if I did, because someone was challenging the theory with yet another theory, I did not notice the fact that they were neither of them the thing they were talking about. When I met people of another culture I noticed they were perplexed when I spoke. So I wanted to pay attention to the chasms of assumption across which I leapt so blithely. In the face of different kinds of consciousness, I became aware of my own modern, rational, technological, administrative consciousness as a situated one. To me phenomenology proposes important methodological suggestions: I recognise the unique moment of any encounter. I take note of when and with what I am theorising and call it into question. I consider the limits and historicity of any consciousness and I attend to assumptions and generalisations. I look with care at the detail of things as they appear to me and try to give account. I try not to count or order them using unspoken notions that I have borrowed from elsewhere.

It would be impossible, as Gadamer points out, to live without theory, generalisation, assumption or categorisation (TM 490). He clarifies that presuppositions are not laid aside to allow correct judgment, but are the necessary ground for any insight that arises (TM 276). Attention to the things themselves cannot mean being wrenched from the ordinary way that I build understanding

on my pre-existing insights about something (TM 567). When I look in a phenomenological way, what I note is the ground and the encounter together. I put aside my tendency to bring in theory and category without noticing it, or to assume self-evidence where there is in fact an insistent demand on my ability to make subtle distinctions in what is speaking to me. I also put aside assumptions that the thing I am encountering is only a manifestation of my own mind and emotions. It is there in itself, quite real. To understand I am using my prejudgments and experience and opening them to question, while exploring and strengthening the arguments of the other (TM 292).

I have attempted to embrace a phenomenological method of clarity and coherence, particularly as it is used by Gadamer and Arendt (Arendt 1966; 1969; Gadamer 2004). I admire their writing, its insistence. To inquire into how something is presenting itself, rather than what I assume about it, is to merge with a process of continuous arising and to have the opportunity to take note of it in all the forms by which it presents itself. Gadamer points out that we cannot escape our own presence in understanding. We are not objective observers of phenomena, but we do, to a greater or lesser extent, open ourselves to the event that is occurring as we come to meet the phenomenon (TM 269).

How does a phenomenological approach offer something to the three arenas of consciousness addressed in this thesis, hermeneutic, developmental and pastoralist? First, it offers a method of focused and comprehensive engagement with the hermeneutic question of understanding: I look at how it presents itself to me in numerous different instances. These observations strengthen arguments for the primordial function of life experience in all of understanding. Second, it offers to clarify development consciousness as I have encountered it. Development is an arena where irreconcilable contests of social theory entwine with ethical notions of goodness and fairness, making the business into a minefield of confused intervention. Phenomenology has the potential to offer an insight to those who, like me, want to come to understandings about what is going on in these embattled contexts. Third, it offers to meet non-western consciousness with a new clarity. It helps to present the ways of thinking that are the hallmarks of western consciousness, making interactions perhaps a little less perplexing.

## **My own experience as a field of inquiry**

In the chapters that follow I tell stories from my education and working life. I do not refer to these experiences because I find them psychologically interesting or universally telling, but because it is fitting with the demands of hermeneutic inquiry to act in this way. To account for understanding as it arises, as I understand it, means looking at how it arises in my own experience. The subject of understanding is separable neither from my own acts of engagement with the question, nor from its origins in my history. I need a field and a method that does not attempt to ignore or bracket my own role. In looking at my own experience, the research finds a focus that is at once manageable, accessible, real and open to reiterated attempts at comprehension and truthfulness. It is fitting with the three elements of phenomenology noted by Ladkin that I should look in this direction: understanding plays out in day-to-day life, it arises as experience, and subjectivity provides the suppositions that are brought into question (Ladkin 2005).

Choosing this approach was not only a philosophical and pragmatic decision, the question was also driven by deep concern with my own misunderstandings and those of my industry. Heidegger's concept of the formal structure of a question suggests that its formulation is guided by the inquirer's concept of what is sought (BT 24-26) <sup>6</sup>. To begin to make the question transparent and understand the answers that it generates, he suggests that is necessary to consider the specific concept that created this very particular question at its point of departure. To go back to my own point of departure, to note exactly how the question was formulated, its nuances and concepts, its expectations and hopes, I had to return to its early manifestations in my own experience and look at it more carefully. With this in mind, I retraced my steps to look for the origin of the question, an exploration that I will turn to in the next chapter.

Understanding, according to Gadamer, is not the object of experience, but experience itself (TM xxi & 259). And Heidegger suggests that it is not adequate to

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<sup>6</sup> From now on I will use (BT: #, §#) to refer to the relevant page and section in Heidegger's 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time*, 2008 Harper Perennial edition, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

know something only by having applied theoretical logic or empirical tests to it, it is also necessary to *experience* it in itself, in its usefulness and its relation to me and to my life (Ladkin 2005). So with some unwillingness, born of embarrassment, I tried out the idea that my own stories, if correctly told, could be the field of inquiry in which the actual happening of insight was making itself known. It was my own understanding that was oriented towards understanding and which understood. I was the inquirer who asked the question and approached it with certain prior conceptions of how it happens. I attempted to clarify these conceptions that were making up the ground of the developing question. I charted experiences over a long period, watching as my judgements developed in encounter with people and events, continuously renewing and amending the question while holding fast to the central phenomenon of understanding. I was presented with a wealth of material to investigate. Where else but in myself could I look at how understanding happened with such care? Where else could I watch and take note of its changing form as I attended to it as a thing in itself?

A thesis that uses personal experience as its main field of interrogation may be criticised for bias and lack of broad significance. But I suggest that these criticisms only apply to claims of universality and I am not making that claim. I am working instead with a specific and situated question and my method is phenomenological. I do not want to explore understanding between people as a system or define it theoretically. Rather I am looking at its play, where I have access to it and where it is embodied for me in my own encounters with others. It is consistent with what I now consider to be true about understanding, that a story makes a contribution to truth by stimulating understanding and debate in others.

As Husserl recognised, meaning begins with oneself and can be looked at in rigorous self-examination (Moran 2000:61). This kind of ‘methodological solipsism’ is not the whole of the work required to comprehend understanding, but it is a necessary starting point that provides a clear ground from which to interpret how others speak of the matter and to engage with them in effective dialogue about it. Understanding is never the province of a lone individual – it is



always a practical interaction of some sort (TM 307). Questions and ideas emerge in the collision of things and people within the world.

Self-examination and dialogue require methodical approaches if they are not to be formless and inarticulate. Looking at the self demands attention to and accounting of suppositions. Accounting for phenomena means dressing the things encountered in their plainest clothes. Engaging in dialogue with others demands attention to exactly what the others say about the thing in question, and to the way I interpret what they say. To achieve this clarity and simplicity, I turn now to the methods offered by action research.

### **Action research**

Action research is a discipline of inquiry that draws some of its inspiration from the work of phenomenological philosophers. It is a form of research that involves finding appropriate, timely and considerate methods of paying and expanding attention in action and reflection, in balanced dialogue, rigorous questioning and artful co-operation (Reason and Bradbury 2001a:xxv). It has been nourished by pragmatism in the way it promotes exploration of contingent realities that mean something and are useful to people; and by Husserlian phenomenology in the way it embraces the ‘the enigma of subjectivity’ and the ‘life-world’ — the world of lived experience (Reason 2003; Ladkin 2005). The methods expect the student to continue with her work in the world, adding a discipline of inquiry.

Responsibility is a central tenet: action research hopes to promote human flourishing (Reason and Bradbury 2001b), remedy power inequities (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001), improve our own actions (Torbert 2001), build human-to-human relationships (Gordon 2001; Gustavsen 2001) and human-to-nature relationships (Hall 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2001b). This responsibility helps create the focus of each inquiry – what to inquire into is generated by what is urgent and agreed by whichever community is involved. My initial reaction to this good intention is suspicion – as I hope to demonstrate in later chapters, good intentions may not be compatible with clarity. They are often excuses to impose imaginary universal notions of what is right. Nonetheless the proposition that the subject and method

of the inquiry should be generated by what is urgent and agreed does fit with my own notion that understanding is an agreement. If my research method is to be consistent with its idea that understanding is agreement, then it should be about something urgent and agreed.

Action research differs from many other approaches to learning in its conception of and methods for dealing with truth. With positivist empiricist approaches truth is understood as something to be uncovered, and theories can be proved, disproved or improved with proof and argument. With action research truth is understood to arise in the inter-subjective agreements of entities in the world: ideas can be entertained, developed, made use of, and then once more regenerated in the light of ever arising new connections. It is a consistent task of knitting together rather than taking apart.

Many action research techniques and principles make use of a conversational method of inquiry between groups of people (Gustavsen 2001; Heron 2001; Kemmis 2001), while others focus on attentiveness in the first person (Torbert 2001; Chandler and Torbert 2003), and others on examining engagement with ones own environment and organisations (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). My own method involves engaging with and questioning local patterns arising in moments when I and other people are speaking with one another across cultural divides. I tried to avoid seeing my task as being to theorise about great processes of politics and history—much as I am always tempted to explain on a big scale—but to notice moments of understanding, such as they are, as they happen. My engagement is a conversation, with myself and others, texts and the world in general. In each conversation there is presupposition and encounter, question and response, comment and answer.

In the action research tradition researchers are encouraged to clarify first their own position, perspective and presuppositions about the matter in question. As a student, my tutors handed me a bunch of tools, strange tools that I turned over in my mind wondering what they could be for. Write a regular journal, they insisted. Read philosophy and work out your epistemology and ontology, they charged. Be aware of the present and keep records. Go back to what you said and

review it again and again. Consider yourself in all your encounters. Don't tell us, show us.

The unaccustomed levels of attention that I was paying myself made me feel self-indulgent and my inquiries were initially halting and inconsistent. I did not understand the action research approach well, particularly not its underlying epistemology and philosophy, nor was I disciplined in it. I wrote lyrical essays and paid attention to my doubts. I adopted a dramatic line in my stories: a tendency to describe the intense colours of African life in eye-popping detail. While the discipline is internally coherent, it is different from mainstream western social science methodologies and a novice finds it easy to slip back into positivist and comparative approaches assessing, categorising and theorising the world.

My questions grew from and exerted influence on encounters in my work in Ethiopia as well being influenced by the process of my research supervision in UK. I started with a personal question about being a foreigner and a facilitator working on poverty and conflict. I moved on to a political inquiry about power and exploitation. Latterly it transformed itself to a question about how we come to understandings with one another. As the question changed I became confused and felt that I must be making mistakes or delaying the research process with unnecessary detours. The inquiry method, just like its subject matter, was emergent and historically affected.

I now think that the early questions of facilitation and political economy are part of the scanning of pre-suppositions that allowed me to articulate the question I am now addressing. The question of reaching understanding knits together the strands of the problematic by looking at a matter more fundamental than either personal behaviour or political economy. Hermeneutics has offered an elegant and generous resolution to a series of questions about understanding.

Drawing on Stacey's observation that local responsive processes create the coherent structures that we call knowledge, my focus of inquiry starts with what is local (Stacey 2001). I move between the foreground of the encounter and the hinterland of its meanings, and between the edge of my horizon, where the questions lie and new suggestions are embraced, and its hinterland, a field of

previously unquestioned language and culture that makes up my identity and knowledge. All that sounds very mobile and graceful, but in practice I find it difficult to do with any consistency. I cannot always purposely select what is hidden in what I take to be self-evident, it only comes forward when it is provoked. I do not choose when a good question will arise. As a method it is unpredictable. It is like taking an enthusiastic young dog for a walk: I hold on to the thread of the object of inquiry, desperate not to lose it, while it drags me through thickets and rubbish piles, across fields and along rivers, on the scent of something interesting.

The researcher converses with the world and people on the subject of her research. She notes what she hears, thinks and feels (from the other and from herself), she repeats what she hears and says, she watches herself as she observes and interprets, and she iterates the technique to observe changes. I developed a set of basic practices: listening, questioning, writing, reading and conversing. They are ordinary practices, but as I have repeated them, considered them and looked at them closely, they have become my discipline.

My inquiry was not disciplined, but it was insistent and, now I look back on it, focused. I have acres of notebooks, each filled with near-verbatim records of pastoralists, officials and development people speaking, written in idiosyncratic shorthand. There was time to write these because much of what I listen to in my work in Ethiopia comes through a translator, Jarso Guyo Mokku mostly, or Girma Kebede, my companions on this mission to understand. From time to time there is a sketch of a tree, a face, a hand, or a donkey. About a quarter of the notebooks are interviews, with my short questions followed by long answers as the pastoralists or politicians told me their ways and their plans. Most of the rest are what people said at pastoralist gatherings. I took these notebooks home, transcribed the contents of many of them, and read and reread them.

I looked at how people introduced matters, who had replied and what they had said. I looked for agreements and for changes in the timbre of the relationships. I noted ways the speakers explained or proposed and ways they had of diverting debates away from certain subjects. I remembered my own thoughts when I was hearing and scribbling and I noted them down. I remembered the place, the weather, where I was sitting, the things I had noticed and the blanks. I remembered the connections I made with what I thought was going on around us at the time – and noted how I phrased my memories in the language of today. A memory was already a historically affected reworking. I remembered and reconsidered what I imagined lay

behind what each person was saying. A pastoralist in Ethiopia, indeed everyone in Ethiopia, speaks cryptically. He or she will use proverbs and leave large bits out because nobody is going to say certain things out loud - just in case they are speaking to the wrong person. I looked for the differences in the ways people addressed me, how they spoke to other foreigners, to others like themselves and to officials.

When I was having a conversation and was being addressed, (I didn't write notes then), I listened to what they said. I would try to forget what I was wondering about the person speaking, or about something else I had to do, and attempted to listen. I would notice my own mind reacting and responding, even as I was catching sight of a hornbill flying over our heads.

The notes fed into the writing of my life as a development professional. I wrote about events from the past that seemed somehow important. I read and reread what I had written and took out all the parts that were lies and embroidery until what was left was the truth, as far as I could put it. I enjoyed it, it revealed much about the way understanding - which is after all about truth - comes forward, or is sold down the river for promises and fears. My supervisor, Donna Ladkin said, 'I always read your stuff right through to the end before going back to the detail because it is so compelling that it carries me along on a wave. At the end, I realize that half of it makes no sense.' And she was right. At least half of it was a filigree of evasion, speculation and exaggeration with nothing to help a reader know where she was or why. I learned then about the difference between art and artifice. There were times when I took out all the artifice from a piece of writing and there was nothing left. Then I would throw that story away.

I was also reading. Philosophers, political economists, novelists, activists, historians and critical theorists were my primary sources: the subject was African and European history, politics, culture, development and philosophy. I was interested in the subjects the authors spoke about and watched my own experiences coming forward in response. I was also interested in the way each argument, if it was well made, seemed so compelling. I was confused when another author, whose argument I found equally compelling, would criticize and contradict the argument of the first. I examined what was compelling me. Many of the books made claims to universality and yet, ultimately I saw them as applicable to their place and time, treatises that told me about the ways of thinking and meanings of a given culture and locality. Each one fitted with its neighbours within my imaginary geography, but none could achieve universality. I also began to make distinctions between what is written with an effort towards truth and what is merely written well. For me, Gadamer stands as the ultimate truthful writer, one who has looked at his subject at length and with great care before he writes.

## My use of stories

This thesis claims validity through the stimulus and provocation of a rich and pointed story of experience, rather than through observations, questionnaires or abstract logics. I hope the approach provokes a reply and a conversation begins. When Karl Jaspers says that philosophizing should be a '*perpetual shaking up, a perpetual appeal to the powers of life in oneself and others,*' I believe he is referring to a similarly provocative and anti-universal approach (Moran and Mooney 2002:358). To have conversation means to be awake to the world and working with it in ways that respect its changing nature and baffling variety.

In this thesis I tell a series of personal stories and meet the phenomenon of understanding in them. I start by looking at an emblematic incident that provoked the inquiry into the forefront of my concerns. To this encounter, and the other experiences that I relate in the following chapters, I have returned repeatedly over the course of my research. I reinterpreted and reused each story, at each retelling paring it down and changing a word here and there. Interpretive adjectives and adverbs came and went – a caustic slant in my embarrassment, or a triumphant note in my performance at the time of writing. I noticed that the essential base of each story remained the same. The core of the encounter persisted and held its own through successive reinterpretations and rejections. It was only through noticing this that I arrived at recognition of the phenomenological method that was, and still is, in operation.

The stories that follow tell of encounters that happened between the 1960s and the 1990s. They were written down in the period between 2002 and 2008 for my study at Bath University. During that time I was coming to Bath to debate with my study group and tutor once every few months and for each visit I would write a story or an essay. At first my work was based out of the UK Institute of Development Studies, taking me to Sweden and Brazil, Bangladesh and Uganda, and I was spending increasing time in Ethiopia working on dialogues with pastoralists until I settled there full-time in 2004. My studies were at an early stage and I felt that my claims about the world made hardly any sense to other people who did not know my work. I imagined that I gave too little evidence and

too weak a contextual description to make what I was saying comprehensible and compelling. So I was determined to provide well-told and accurate stories which would orient my interlocutors to the situation and allow them to see as I saw and thus prove my claims to be true.

Later I came to approach the same experiences in a different way, that is, to examine how I was coming to understand both in the encounter itself and coming to understand the function the story was playing each time it was invoked. There is an essential difference between the story teller of the early years of this research (2002-2007), who was using each experience to make an analytical claim dressed up in descriptive words, and the story teller of today (2008-9), who is using the experience to see more clearly into the lightning-fast movement of life as it is lived. If in the early years of the study I was interested to give the story texture, proof and reason to make it work better as a claim; today I am interested to see what happens when the story is enabled to speak for itself as far as I can allow it to do so, making fewer theoretical claims.

This is a phenomenological point, whereby the speaker achieves a cooler perspective on the matter in question through de-scaling the phenomenon of too many layers of abstraction and through thinning the interpretations down to a more precise point relating to the phenomenon's own intention. The unelaborated story is a simple one whose helpful challenge may be easier to hear than a story with too much performance and too many unexamined beliefs, justifications and wishes. When presupposition becomes a self-reflecting mirror that stops me from engaging with the experience at all, I begin to feel I must be missing something.

Another reason to notice the difference between the story tellers of the first and second periods of the research (2002-7 and 2008-9) is that with their different attitudes each asks something different of the story. The teller of the 2003 version asks, 'what else could or should I have done in the situation?' while the teller of today's version asks, 'what is happening with understanding here?' This adjustment in how I am using the stories mirrors Gadamer's distinction between scientific method and philosophy, where the philosopher's interest is in the happenings that lie beyond our wishing and wanting, (*'not what we do or what we*

*ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing'* (TM xxviii)).

I want to take a philosophical rather than a methodical approach, because I believe it will allow the phenomena of understanding to speak for themselves. A methodical approach that presupposes 'a finding' seems to distance the subject at hand. A philosophical approach that merely wants to see what is happening seems to open channels of understanding previously closed by theorizing and methodologising.

## ***The universality of the approach***

Admonishing those who rely on scientific methodology to recognise the limits of its empiricism and theory, Gadamer shows science to be a form of consciousness which is located rather than universal, and useful for that very reason. This view calls into question reliance on any one consciousness as a way of understanding everything. Modes of thought arise from the effects of history, from provisional prejudice, from encounter and fusion by a process of doubt and question. Gadamer gives texture to the argument that there are and must be multiple kinds of consciousness which develop, meet, fuse and compete.

Lest we should sink into confused relativism arising from the idea that consciousnesses are multiple and there is no absolute truth, phenomenology comes to the rescue. It shows consciousness to be an aspect of the things themselves. Consciousness and the thing are one. The solidity of the world returns; a solidity that I think we cannot help but feel and know, arising as it does from the existential fact of consciousness. How real things are interpreted varies, but the thing itself remains itself.

Gadamer's encounter with tradition and Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology argue for an inquiry that involves the self as an unembarrassed perceiver of the phenomenon in question. Bringing the self and the phenomenon home to each other is a radical and I would argue fundamental way of coming to understanding.



That I should try to understand with the rest of the world is something for which I have a range of motivations in combination with existential necessity. I do not think that there is any universal morality underlying the matter, although there is a historically effected morality that each of us has. I am working to a pragmatic morality of my own, one that makes sense within my world. It is built on certain suppositions that I hold to be true for our situation for now, but these beliefs are not god-given and they are mutable in the course of our inquiries.

What I suggest here is not going to be universally applicable. I hope only to be engaging or, better still, provoking. Hermeneutics makes claims to universality. How can we deal with this apparent paradox? It is the concept of interpretation that releases us. Hermeneutics itself, and anything purporting to be universal, must be constantly reinterpreted.

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## Chapter 3 – The Historicity of Understanding

My question about understanding was born in a situation of despair when, in 1984, I encountered famine. It was a situation with which I had no experience. I had no resources to help me explain why such senseless suffering could descend on so many innocent people, apparently without warning. I asked many Sudanese people to explain the famine, but I could not comprehend their answers. I tried to be helpful and I tried to understand causes and effects, to find blame, retribution and solutions. It was only when that excoriating time had itself become history that I came to see my misunderstanding as an expression of historicity, of my being thrown into life in a certain time and culture which defined the parameters of what and how I could understand. In this chapter I explore how my historicity formed the foundation of the questions I asked in Sudan in that fateful year. I aim to trace some of the roots of the question that I am asking in this thesis, and also to illustrate the inexorable workings of history on my consciousness.

### ***The famine, the rich girl and the goat***

History belongs to each of us and there is no getting beyond it and no decision can overcome its influence. This story is an initial point of departure. The experience it describes awakened in me a question about understanding that demanded to be answered. It was 1984. I was 22 years old, newly emerged from university where I had studied agricultural geography of Africa and Asia. I had been in Sudan for nine months, doing field research with farmers and pastoralists for a large World Bank agricultural project. I had ideals, ambitions, curiosity and optimism. In the intensity of the encounter that I now describe I was confronted with the enormity of my ignorance. The encounter serves as a point before which my prejudices about understanding were invisible because what I knew about

knowledge seemed self-evident and universal, and after which they were called into question.

1984. Quite suddenly, it seemed to me, the whole of northern Sudan fell into famine. Harsh, harsh famine. The sky turned brown, the grass brown, everything was brown. Children turned to sticks, old eyes in tiny bodies, and died everywhere. Grandparents stopped eating and faded away. Men disappeared to Khartoum or the cotton fields in the east promising to find work and send money, food or whatever they could. I was shocked. I joined an international agency to help with food distribution. I tried to be useful, working long hours organising trucks, warehouses, waybills, loaders and un-loaders. A handful of foreigners took charge of thousands of tonnes of sorghum shipped from the USA and delivered it to stores in hundreds of towns and villages up desert tracks and muddy rutted roads. We handed it over to government there and monitored it.

We began to realise that we did not understand famine; we thought there was no food, and so we brought it, laboriously and late. We learned afterwards that there had been food in the region all along, in merchants' warehouses waiting for prices to rise, but people had no money to buy it. I read Amartya Sen who had written eloquently about how this happened in the Ethiopian famine of the early seventies (Sen 1981). No one I met had heard of him.

I went out with a colleague to look for nomadic livestock herders to see if they needed and had got a share of the relief food. It was late afternoon when our team reached a small camp 30 miles south of El Obeid. There were some sticks and bits of old plastic sorghum sack that made up the house. A thin woman came and greeted us with her children behind her. We explained our intent, asked questions and measured the children's arms for our nutrition survey. We talked about what they would do now and after the drought. They showed us their supplies, three kid goats, and a pan of *mukhet* soaking in water, a wild berry that tastes foul<sup>7</sup>. Whenever I see that plant now I think of those days. The savannah sun was going down. Her husband and older sons appeared bringing no animals with them. So there were only three young goats. I asked if we could camp with them that night. They were very welcoming. I said, "don't give us food, we have some rice and beans in the car, let's share it." They said they would certainly give us food, we were their guests. We turned to each other, embarrassed and frightened. 'We should have gone; we shouldn't have imposed ourselves.' The father killed one of the family's goats for us that night.

We brought our rice and beans and together we had a feast. The food was good, the company cheerful. They said we should not worry about the goat: it had to be eaten sometime, we were a good reason. It was a fine

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<sup>7</sup> *Boscia senegalensis*

party. We did not talk about what to do. Neither they, nor I found questions to ask or suggestions to make about the famine.

We left in the morning and they waved us away in the bleak harsh light of the famine sun. Who died, who survived? I don't know. I sensed that those people knew how to live and we, with our clipboards and arm measurements were at a loss. Our way of organising everything, directing and controlling, distributing and monitoring seemed nowhere near as powerful in the story of people's survival in that famine as was their own way of managing it. I thought that we contributed, probably, to saving some lives, but I felt that we also contributed to a subtle loss of humanity in that place. Because, I thought to myself, our questionnaires didn't have a box marked respect. They only had food, medicine and control.

Coming from a generation and a place where famine had been pushed to the back of our memories, I believed I could find a rational explanation and provide a technical solution to the situation. The family, co-existing with the drought-scarred earth, seemed to have some other perspective that I could not fathom. I expected them to understand my presence and they, clearly, did not. I felt that we should have found a way to co-operate. We managed to eat and smile together, but I wanted to make a difference to them and to the overall direction of the famine, a situation for which I felt some responsibility as a rich Westerner. I believed that one day we would be able to understand each other because we would push aside veils of misunderstanding that created the distance between us.

A few months later, standing in a windy famine camp on the edge of town, watching US Senator George Bush (senior) dispensing platitudes to thousands of gaunt women and a pack of journalists, I resolved that I would try to find an answer to the enormous questions raised by that famine. I had tasted a bitter realisation of the differences in culture and understanding between me and people I was supposedly working to assist. My mind was full of questions: about why it had happened, about my role as a foreign helper and about my inability to come to understandings with the people. Something was terribly wrong and I was neither able to comprehend nor act on it in ways that seemed fitting. All I could do was set out on a search for an answer to a question that at the time I could barely formulate.

Because of our membership of a greater power and our alignment with the political elites of the country, we owed no hungry person a real account of our actions. In my heart we wanted to give an account, but no one would hear it, least of all the victims. The relief system asked only if we had delivered the North's surplus grain into the clamouring mouths of millions. It did not question our responsibility for stamping on people's self-respect or for helping lay the foundations for wars. In our ignorant liberal colonialism we encouraged the worst behaviours of the new elites, advising and supplying them in their games of patronage and exploitation. Our work admitted no real commitment to the possibility that the answers to the questions of food, livelihood and social organisation might lie within

the people's own vocabularies, within their best version of humanity and that which would fit with the changing world around them. It did not admit to something that needed to be created between us, built out of the soil and history, rather than extracted from a text book.

### **The first telling – putting things to rights**

I first put this story down as part of a chapter I contributed to a book on international aid (Hinton and Groves 2001). The book was concerned with questions about including people who are the subjects of aid into the process of its decisions. It was concerned with how all the players in the game could interact in beneficial and co-operative rather than harmful and competitive ways. My chapter was about understanding ourselves and it was framed as if understanding ourselves was the opposite of understanding others. I talked of our tendency to pretend that we, the aid workers, were not really part of the equation; we stood aside with our clipboards, our papers and our smiles and ignored the effect of our culture, power and emotions. The part the story played in making this argument was intended to be dramatic. I was saying, 'look at this well-intentioned, self-important young white fool going about in a culture far from her own, getting involved with matters of life and death where she has no hope of coming to understanding!' I wanted to point out how useful it would be to have self-awareness. I explained how the shock of the famine led me to wish to know more, so that I would eventually be able to work out what to do. I noted dryly that I, like many others before and after me, became obsessed with understanding these exotic situations, but paid little attention to ourselves as bearers of a virus of dominance. I maintained the priority of action. The purpose of returning to the story was to know what to do.

The telling of the story at that time was heavy with theory. Between 1997 and 2003 I was part of a group at the Institute of Development Studies that focused on participation of poor people in processes and institutions in which they might have an interest and yet from which they were excluded. We had a political agenda of responsibility, egalitarianism and righteous empathy and a theoretical grounding in materialism, power and conscience that drew on Marx, Foucault and Freire. I believed that I could remove myself from who I was and what I

represented by studying it and railing against it. I believed this would make co-operation work better. It was not until 2008 when I retold the story again, and attempted to look at it with phenomenological eyes that I saw it not only as a straightforward proof of the unrestricted hubris of our profession, but also as an expression of historicity (my place in history) and as a source of the presuppositions and the questions that I later took up in this thesis. The earlier view of the situation as hubris was a way-station on my road of understanding. The hubris explanation was simply inadequate, there was something more to be understood.

### **The telling today – provocation as the point of departure**

I was provoked. My expectations of easy solutions to poverty were brought up short by the incident. I had expected to be able to solve problems, learn from and about people and come to agreements with them. The incident pulled these expectations forward from where they had been hiding under the mantle of the development worker's innocent helpfulness. I remember the sensation of desperation, not just because of all those inexplicable deaths, but because I expected to be able to find out what to do.

Gadamer says, of provocation, that it is a starting point for a question, a point of departure: *'It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. ...For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. Understanding begins ... when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. We now know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a question'* (TM 298).

The thing under discussion, the famine—the reason for it and the way to deal with it—was understood differently by the people suffering it and me in my attempts to resolve it. For each of us it meant something, but our meanings felt disconnected. The aid agencies and the people who worked in them assimilated the part that involved making claims for solving it; it was this part that then

affected all our futures as interventionists. Since the famine had proved less than permeable to my assumption that such events could be eradicated and could be explained in a universal sense, I was provoked by the lack of understanding.

This provocation arises from something being recognisable but distinct. I notice a distance between the thing, as it is presented by the other, and the thing as I see it myself. There was what Gadamer calls the 'play of strangeness and familiarity' in what I was hearing from the Sudanese people (TM 295). I was familiar with the outlines of what they were telling me, about rain, crops, livestock and food. These things had somehow failed and were not being replaced at anything like the speed that I expected. Children, mothers, sick people and old people were dying before our eyes and the Sudanese did not look surprised, just sad and resigned. The extreme unfamiliarity of the situation brought forward two questions – what is famine, and, why don't we understand? I wanted to strengthen the argument of the people themselves, because it must be they that understood famine, they must be right in what they are saying. But I could not find a way to do it, what they were saying made no *sense*. It was not that they were wrong about famine, or stupid about it, they just did not, could not, or did not care to explain it *to me*. My self-evident certainty in the superiority and communicability of our institutional and technical explanations was provoked. I could feel my history as it encountered something foreign. I could feel the weight of culture orienting my direction.

I was disappointed. I asked questions and got answers, but the answers did not lead to places I could follow. 'Why did this happen? What can we do?' To neither did I get an answer that I understood. The gift of the goat only served to underline the strangeness. I understood that Sudanese people are profoundly hospitable, but I could not understand how a family could put themselves at risk to fulfil their moral obligation. I caught only a glimpse, through my western European eyes, of what they were addressing to me with that goat; its meaning in the great tradition of nomadic pastoralism—of solidarity, hope and holding the world together.

The encounter did not challenge my belief that underneath the obscurities of the situation I would be able to find a way of understanding what was going on. It challenged my expectation of immediate knowing and easy communication with others. The incident brought my simplistic notions of fact-finding and communication into the foreground and into question. I adjusted my expectations to accommodate the new notion of taking time and making an effort to find out more. I interpreted the provocation as a call to learn more broadly and deeply. I directed my questions to the processes of famine, the language of those people, and the political and economic forces impelling us. But, (as I will relate in later sections) learning more about people, politics, cultures, technologies and institutions generated repeated solutions that did not stop famines or increase understanding with others. Theories of famine only distanced me further from famine as a reality. The efforts did not lead to clear resolution of the question raised on that day. The provocation remained, waiting to be given its due. It was in its continuing failure to be properly resolved that I noticed it. It irritated me.

Now, in the second telling, I am returning to it once again. Following Gadamer, I am not looking for a new solution, but for an understanding of how my question came to be. I look now at the history of my prejudice that formed the conception of understanding that I brought to that situation. I am looking at the presuppositions that were the ground for my interpretation of the event and the rising question that I then worked on, in one way or another, for 20 years, about coming to understanding with others.

### ***The aid worker begins***

I turn now to the neophyte participant in the aid business that I was when I reached Sudan at the beginning of that first famine year, 1984. I want to flesh out a little this prejudice that we found above – knowing, communicating and positively resolving problems.

I chose geography as my field, and within that, development in Africa and Asia, because it supplied the right mix of science, certainty, pity and world-changing potential for me. At the age of 22 I finished my degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and was offered a junior



research position in Sudan. I was to investigate the spread of the desert in Darfur. I travelled there with my boyfriend, now my husband. We took the long way round, taking in Morocco, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Central Africa and Sudan on the way. We were entranced, entertained and occasionally very frightened by the people, animals and landscapes that we came across on that journey.

I arrived in Darfur in western Sudan for my first job in the aid business in January 1984. My task was to help establish whether or not local farming practises were causing desertification. It was a big World Bank project involving agronomic trials for higher yielding crops, supplies of fertiliser and deep wells. I spent a happy time roving about the woods, fields and villages of that beautiful place, learning from farmers how they made decisions about crop rotation and knew about soil fertility. The farmers were kind and hospitable. They gave me fizzy drinks and I took samples of the different soils they pointed out, sands, clays and sandy clays, cropped and fallow. I spread out my satellite photos of the region and matched what they said to what I saw. I concluded that the farmers knew their ecology, a fact that the World Bank experts had questioned and I wanted to prove. Around each deep well there was a village and around that an area of near-desert about four miles across. They could crop that land one year in ten. There was a sinister plant called *usher*<sup>8</sup> with white irritant sap that showed the poor state of that soil. Beyond that zone were the real fields, which the farmers cropped for five years and fallowed for fifteen or twenty in what seemed to be an organised equilibrium. A fallow had done its work when a certain hardwood, *babanus*<sup>9</sup>, re-established. It was a useful wood, the farmers told me. Beyond that zone was savannah forest, through which nomadic pastoralists moved. Their ecology seemed to involve the adaptation of their whole society to the natural world. While the farmers and pastoralists and their various communities were each managing elegantly, there was indeed a problem. The more deep wells that were drilled, the more villages appeared and the more their spheres began to overlap. And who was putting in the wells? We were. I wrote it up. The project administrators filed my report.

The seduction of our gifts (or cheap loans in this case) was palpable. Local politicians gained power, as we did, from the sinking of those wells. And the water was good, cool, clear and clean. But later I saw a slow-acting poison in that water, in social terms. I heard that in 2000 during a drought, people in northern Kenya stopped the government from drilling new wells. Apparently they lined up in front of the rigs and refused to move. The people knew by then the rough science and politics of deep wells and they wanted water on their own terms. Studies by Leach and Fairhead (1998) show that while the accepted orthodoxy among experts is that people in the Sahel are degrading their environment, actually in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel, people plant more trees than they use.

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<sup>8</sup> *Calotropis procera*  
<sup>9</sup> *Dalbergia melanoxylon*

Nonetheless, I became a part of the poverty eradication paradigm. I learned to fill in a planning format called the logical framework, in which we laid out our goals, purpose, activities and indicators of success. We did not consult with villagers when we put these together, only with technical advisors. We implied that by drilling a well we would create health, wealth and convenience, which was our goal. As time went on I began to realise that no project *ever* turned out as outlined in those forms. Where wells were drilled, some people got healthy, others dispossessed, conflict broke out, the immediate environment degraded, a vegetable garden flourished for a while. The dynamic complexity of the result of any action seemed much larger than these papers could ever encompass and yet we are still using them today. We thought we had control, with all our systems, but we had no such thing. Darfur is now torn apart by an appalling war. The seeds of that war were being sown deep in the soil even as I was there. Even those wells were part of it. I had stepped, innocent and complicit all at once, into the world of aid.

## Prejudice

Gadamer says of prejudice that it means a 'provisional verdict.' It is not a confirmed judgment, but a pre-understanding without which we would not be able to recognise what we encounter, and so be available for new understandings (TM 270-276). We need to rehabilitate our definition of prejudice so that it is not seen as a negative state, he suggests. It is in fact largely positive in that it is a thing that builds. It is the sum of our previous understandings and the fore-projection of the moment. It is a thread among threads of understanding that carries along its intertwining way as we live our lives. It is not rigid but provisional, the proviso being that it needs to be constantly challenged to keep it from turning to stone and becoming what Sartre calls a 'disposition', a state of being which is accepted as a tendency both by the self and by society (Sartre 1972; quoted in Moran and Mooney 2002:395). That challenge comes from provocation and provocation comes from the existential nature of learning and connecting, an observation brought forward by Heidegger that I will examine in more detail in later chapters.

What were the prejudices that were at that moment with the Sudanese pastoralists suspended before me and what was the question that arose? I came to Sudan thinking that I would be able communicate with people of a very different culture, if I had enough empathy to do so. It appeared that we were indeed

communicating, but we were coming to only the most elementary of understandings. I was attempting to discover rather than communicate, because my prejudice was to *find things out*. I now want to learn more about the provocation and make my question more transparent by looking into the consolidation of the prejudices that emerged. These prejudices came from my tradition. I need, then, to go back further into my history.

## ***A London childhood***

Turning to experiences that had a hand in creating the expectations of ‘knowing’, ‘finding out’ and ‘communicating with strangers’ in the first place, I explore some of the foundations to how I came to understandings in Sudan. In the story below, I give not an incident but a general impression of the fusion of my tradition and me as I was growing up. I endeavour to tell it how it was for me then – fragmentary and contradictory. I was absorbed in the historical effects of language, expectation and consideration of material things. This was life as I lived it. I made provisional sense of it.

I was born in London in 1962 and grew up there among the jostling races and classes of Britain’s capital. My home was wealthy and I understood that it embodied in its formality and elegance the ideals of earlier powerful generations and the hopes of our own. My mother’s grandfather was a successful Irish wine merchant, my father’s forebears were earls, Foreign Secretaries and other pillars of the British establishment. My relatives, when they came for weekends and lunches or when we went to their country houses whose roofs leaked and whose dining tables sparkled with engraved silver and delicate china, would talk about their relatives, the eccentrics, diplomats and dissolute heirs. They wove webs of family, status and place in the world. I also went several times with my mother to visit Mrs Lane in a tower block in South London. She had worked for us as a cleaner in our house. We would cross the concrete car park past half-burned mattresses, the wind blowing litter across our path. We would go up in a lift that smelled of urine to the 15<sup>th</sup> floor. I expected it to break down and we would run out of air. Her flat had big views, a pastel fluffy carpet and a warm gas fire. We perched on neat armchairs with lace covers on the headrests, and Mrs Lane offered us cake and tea. I remember the mutual admiration between my mother and Mrs Lane for their exquisite politeness to each other. I understood that vast houses with leaking roofs and opinionated people connected themselves to superior social status, while cavernous tower-blocks, however perfect the fluffy carpets and politeness inside, were indicative of danger. I admired but worried about Mrs Lane.

My first remembered books were adventure stories, tales of giants, fairies and tangled forests. I travelled across their vistas and felt the excitement of their possibilities. But I feared their dark uncontrolled places, their uncertain moralities and dubious outcomes, and so I attached myself to a hero, a safe one who embodied the ideas that I hoped would take me where I wanted to go. I selected Tintin, an intelligent little person who travels the world sorting things out through a mix of being polite and being right. At school I took courses in science, languages and geography, all in a vein of sorting out the troubles of the world through the technology and intelligence of man. I wanted to manipulate outcomes on a broad scale. Heroes and scientists found out facts and changed the world. I would do so too. Our focus was on scientific progress, economic growth and intellectual if not sexual freedom (we were ambivalent about that). My grandparents pointed out the warmth of it all after the cold and dull post-war years.

At school we learned to build from a component up into complex engineering. In biology we started with the single celled amoeba and built from there. We reached a diagram of a cross-section of a plant under a microscope. And on we went to frogs, humans and global ecosystems. In chemistry we learned about elements and numbers of electrons. Learn that, we were told and then next year you will understand how they combine to make the world. In geography we divided the earth up into ecological and economic zones and learned them one by one, starting with the equatorial rainforest and ending with the tundra. Each year more of the pattern of our universally understandable reality was revealed. I went to the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum over and over again. I admired the workings of the steam engine, the Apollo rockets and the electron microscope. Science, we were told, contributed to our industry and economy, and to question it would be inimical to our progress as a civilisation. Our science gave us physical and political power and a sense of unassailable self-importance and progress. We would reach planets beyond our solar system and find new resources for our survival as a species. We would be able to predict the weather and control climate. There was a technology for every need and an administration to match it. Everybody on our planet would have a fridge, a phone, a TV and enough to eat. They would eventually all take part in the market economy, which was quite obviously superior because it allowed us to make and buy whatever we wanted.

At the University of London, where I studied geography, I made maps and extrapolations from satellite images of the earth. I learned about the green revolution in India: systems of irrigation, commodity production, salination, markets, corruption, politics, tribes, climates and ecologies. I learned that Plato posed a battling dualism between idea and reality, Kant between reason and feeling, Marx between base and superstructure and Freire between victim and oppressor. So I also came to believe in a lifelong conflict between subject and object, failure and success, right and wrong, clever and stupid, fact and myth.

I understood the world through a combination of sensation and reason. I, as a rational human subject felt myself to be at the centre of the cognitive and moral world. First I sensed something – I saw, heard, touched, smelt, felt it. Then I analysed it, categorised it, for example animal, vegetable, or mineral, possible or impossible, red or blue, cause or effect. I fitted it into a universal schema that made it reasonable. Branches of knowledge dealt with different subject matters, but all with the same basic concepts of how to understand, essentially a revealing of fundamental laws and qualities by empirical study. It applied as much to geology as to anthropology and the other human sciences. It meant that coming to understanding with someone was governed by rationality. It made almost complete sense. Any variation with what had been thought in earlier days was because of imperfections later put right. Any reliance on the sphere of common sense was something to be ironed out in due course. Where there were gaps in the perfection of the positivist argument, they were filled with the expectation of new discoveries.

The triumphant epistemology of my family and the society in which I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s was what I call logical elitism – it was positivist, authoritarian and the outcome of superiority. But the tradition had never been one of pure reason. Our culture showed an entwining of fact and aesthetic, science, spirit and humanism everywhere. It had been manifest in the book selection on my parents' shelves. It was there on the floor of the great Abbey at Westminster – a 14<sup>th</sup> century marble mosaic by Cosmati, whose intertwining and never ending circles, boundless centre, bands of blood-edged yellow, orange, pink and bluish grey onyx seem to illustrate the formation of the universe and the co-operation of god and physics (Foster 1991).

I felt that being female was a particular disability which I needed to overcome by being as scientific as possible. In the sitting room at home there was a record player and a bookshelf of novels and histories. The great composers, writers, artists and travellers seemed beguiling and extraordinary. They were the gods and goddesses of a transient, diverting and imaginary kingdom of no solid consequence in the reasoned Enlightenment society that I was determined to join.

I heard my parents talking about the way things were changing for people of our kind. They referred wistfully to the old days of the nobility. They talked about new economic and social circumstances in which legal, intellectual and administrative bureaucracies were paramount. My siblings and I were educated strategically to cross a bridge from the world of the old nobility, to which we clung because it was our history and our importance, towards the new world of professional elitism. Our family agreed with liberal values of equality and individualism, at least within boundaries where we could remain powerful according to our expectations. We valued ancient patrician institutions and we practiced ruthlessness and charity. As I saw it, we were fighting for survival of a dying aristocratic identity; as an economic class I thought of us strategically

repositioning ourselves as intellectuals and professionals; as a post-colonial nation I felt we were continuing to claim the only right understanding of all things in the face of a critical multicultural world. My family used our excellent educations and easy superiority to make a play for staying at the top of society, implying that only we could provide leadership that was knowledgeable, incorrupt, universal and true.

## Authority and opinion

When I first wrote this story of my childhood and education, I thought I was describing my struggle against and acquiescence to science and positivism. Now I look at it again and it speaks to me of my history, nurtured in my family and the social and institutional context that was my 1960's Britain. If I came to admire knowledge, the business of having an opinion and the notion of success and control it was neither a mistake nor an achievement, it was what happened. These admirations emerged as presuppositions that were brought to my attention as possibly at variance with those of others when I was faced with the provocation of the famine in Sudan. The experience brought into question the foundation of 'knowing' and 'world-control' on which my judgments had been standing. Gadamer says, '*understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated*' (TM 290).

I have tried here to account for the things that were influencing my approach to understanding. I gave credence to the naturalness of authority, elegance, formality and impenetrability of my family and my English class as it came up against the worlds of other people like Mrs Lane. I took in the dogmatism and imperialism of my education, admiring its successes. It did not appear dogmatic, it appeared to be true. I came to believe in the power of the human intellect to achieve anything it put its mind and science to. I noticed the way social schisms seemed to function, and while wishing to fight them and evade their grip, I accepted their existence. I did not accept the gulfs of incomprehension that divided us.

Gadamer remarks that opinion resists admission of ignorance and suppresses questions. '*Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be*

*the general opinion, just as the word that the Greeks have for opinion, doxa, also means the decision made by the majority in the council assembly. How then can ignorance be admitted and questions arise?’* (TM 366). In our education we were rewarded for opinions, and most particularly received opinions. Gadamer, however, makes a distinction between authority and opinion. Authority, he suggests, includes that which is handed to us by tradition and is accepted by us as right and true within that tradition, not because it is powerful or unquestioned, but because it is questioned and found fitting.

I had learned from a positivist tradition that to be right meant to have power over the world. Authority had the dual meaning of superiority in knowledge and in status. While the original meaning of authority related to having created comprehensive and acceptable understanding about a subject, to have authority also came to mean to have power. Social position and military-political success gave us the power to know better than those weaker than ourselves. Men did this to women, white people to black, elites to the poor, educated to illiterate. The growing use of the word authority as a bureaucratic office added to its dominion (Foucault 1995). Even as I wished that the non-elites had rights to knowledge and for their wisdom to be heard, I built up a conception of understanding that was elitist, divisive, dominating and simultaneously romantic in its acceptance of the differences—and weaknesses—of the other. Carrying with me the habits of status, I was a knowing emissary of my culture. My interest was to spread my knowledge, ill-formed as it was, as a means of confirming my own existence, meaning and community. My questions were aimed at confirming what I thought I knew.

A clear theme that arises from my education in western culture is a conception that understanding is found through invasion. Our scientific tradition involves peeling away layers, digging down, controlling for variation, collecting information and bearing it away for analysis, subjecting it to procedures. It means taking things from their context and applying theories, manipulating and refashioning. This invasive mode of seeking to understand I took with me to Africa, together with the elitism of education and technology, the missionary notion of pity and the positivism of universal truth. In 2002, I read Foucault’s



description of the prison psychologist extracting data from the hapless prisoner, pinning the prisoner to a categorical specimen board like a dead moth. It was then that I came to appreciate my own way of coming to understanding about alien people's ways and behaviours. The invasive, extractive technique of knowing was producing its own understanding. It suggested the other's unfair inscrutability or low intelligence. It seemed to cause the ghastly misunderstanding of the colonial administrator in Chinua Achebe's *'Things Fall Apart'* (Achebe 2005) or the confused isolation of the colonial governor in Okri's *'Infinite Riches'* (Okri 1999). When I read of the encounter of the European and the Nigerian in Chinua Achebe, I was given a perspective I had not yet seen: *'The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart'* (2005:125). Each reading expanded the inner substance of my horizon, taking my understanding of understanding from an idea of invasive extraction to one of co-operative fusion.

### **Common sense and tradition**

Becoming conscious of the beliefs that have been handed down to me by tradition does not mean that I am emancipated from them; it makes them available. I can question them or reinforce them. I was aware of the authority and the questionability of being elite from a long way back, and I was able to criticize it, justify it and keep the concept, all in the language of my own logic and tradition. As Gadamer puts it, *'tradition is not the vindication of what has come down from the past but the further creation of moral and social life; it depends on being made conscious and freely carried on'* (TM 571).

This links us to the mode of 'common sense,' which draws its sustenance from changing traditions of what is good. Common sense offers what is sensible and proper. In Roman antiquity it was thought of as 'love of community,' yet its meaning developed in Europe over the centuries to become variously a question of tact, taste, rational morality and folk practicality in turn (TM 19-28). In European antiquity it seems to have been a kind of understanding that embraced



all other kinds, but now in much of European thought it is only a residual appendix to rationality.

The story of my upbringing suggests that tradition as it is manifest in the present comprises more than just the negativity of opinion and the positivity of authority but also includes common sense. Mrs Lane and my mother taking tea was, I thought, common sense. It was right, but it was in some ways unimportant. We could have been out in the world making money, or conquering ignorance rather than chatting. But common sense turns out to be very important. It is something that I think few of us would be willing to drop in favour of pure rationality. In my view, it is analogous with what the philosophers Goodman and Elgin call 'rightness.' Rightness is a matter of 'fitting and working' (Goodman and Elgin 1988:158). Ideas we have about what is true and suitable are arrived at because they fit with the tradition as well as with the demands, discourse and language of the present.

I came to Sudan thinking that I could find out what to do using intellect, technology, resources and power. There was an authority and tradition of which I felt a part, albeit a rather hesitant part, that gave me a sense of sureness and capability. I came from a place where it was possible and desirable to get hold of and apply resources: theory, science, technology, ethics, finance and organisation were all available. I brought with me the tradition of having cups of tea with people and found its equivalent everywhere I went. The rightness and usefulness of my understanding was self-evident to me, coming as it did from countless sources that seemed to make up the whole of life and truth. The explanations that I was using seemed based on a proper foundation of thousands of years of civilisation and thought.

Neither provocative shock nor logic shifted these explanations and there was no epiphany – why? My ideas are born of my tradition with its long heavy train. They are resilient, supported in language and largely immune from deliberate reconfiguration. To explore further the foundations of this resilience, I return twice more to the years before I reached Sudan to look again, and again, at the sedimentation of my prejudice.

## ***The bus to Tooting***

I am now interested in the resilience of a given prejudice or set of prejudices, their persistent unwillingness to develop very far despite the world's energetic efforts to remind them to move on. What happens when prejudice is consolidated? The following story perhaps gives some clues.

I was eight years old; I had long red socks on, a grey skirt, a blue cape and a red bobble hat. I felt like a pixie. I was sure that I knew the bus my older sister and I needed to get on. I remember that our hats and socks matched the colour of the bus. We got on and scrambled up the stairs. It headed south across London, in what seemed a familiar direction. I watched people get on and off. I saw young women get on at the Kings Road wearing mini skirts and white patent leather boots, I saw women in tweed skirts and jackets who got off at Chelsea, I saw opaque men with grey hair stretched across their bald heads, I saw fat black women with string shopping bags and floppy felt hats. I saw streets of terraced houses, corner shops, bus stations, department stores, parks, railway arches, junkyards and zebra crossings. I began to realize that I wasn't recognizing the landmarks anymore. A group of loud tattooed building workers in paint- and dust-streaked overalls, a man with a cigarette and donkey jacket and two old women with hairnets joined us on the bus. The further we went, the poorer the people got and the more difficult it seemed to me to have to admit to them that we were lost. I saw the familiar symbol of an underground station, it was called Tooting Bec, a place I had never heard of, deep in the wildest lands of south London. My sister and I looked at each other. Clutching the rail, we scrambled down the stairs, swaying with the movement of the jerking bus, and gazed up at the conductor. I noticed his metal ticket machine, his dark suit, stubbly face and uninterested eyes. He hustled us off and pointed across the road. Hand in hand, we advanced into the jaws of the underground station. We went up to a uniformed black man and asked him how we could get home. He surprised us. He smiled. He put us, ticketless, on the right train and we got to Clapham Common, home territory, no trouble.

I wanted to be like my parents and older sister, clever and organized. I wanted to be respected and admirable. For a long time I felt bad that I had been so foolish as to get on the wrong bus. I also felt a secret thrill. It is like standing in an art gallery in front of a work which is neither obvious nor incomprehensible, and finding it inexplicably attractive. Despite my decision to avoid getting lost, I never lost the joy of getting lost, nor the joy of travelling on top of a bus.

At the beginning of the bus trip, standing on the pavement looking up at the number of the looming bus, I was excited, sure, unsure at once. I got on the bus and was reassured. I settled into the pleasure of its red and blue seats, its big windows and views. As the journey went on the threat grew

and grew until it became a massive repudiation – I should not have got on this bus... In the end I felt that the dangers of the experience outweighed the joy of it, so I made a concrete decision. I would avoid getting lost again.

I have tried to strip the story of excessive interpretation, to leave only a thin interpretive layer over the basic colours, textures, movements, sounds, thoughts and other stimulations of the event. I am looking for the prejudices about knowing and control that were later challenged in Sudan. My understanding of life bifurcated and expanded. As a result of my decision I was going to be missing interesting, unexpected things (a 'free' kind of knowing in encounter in the world), but it was going to be worth it to avoid the anxiety of error, failure and danger (a controlled and controlling kind of knowing, or knowingness). I note an apparent turn towards knowingness and my sense of loss of the wild and unexpected. I also note the splendid complexity of the decision, its attempt to reject prejudices of sensuous engagement and vagueness, its embracing of the prejudice of knowingness authorised by my tradition. At times of shock and failure it seems that epiphany is the last thing to expect. I turned to the safety of my tradition.

Attempted rejection of the free kind of knowing did not mean its disappearance, however. Both freedom and carefulness, remained available for continued provocation and development, but a division had been made between them and each had acquired a different value. I regenerated the threads of my tradition, its philosophy, language and spirit. My family and society valued, above all, success. Here in this encounter was an intertwining of a happening, tradition and me. I brought prior beliefs about what was fun and what was dangerous and they were fleshed out in experience. I decided that it would be good to protect myself from and be forearmed against the unknown and unexpected. What now appeared to be a battle between freedom and carefulness itself became the ground of subsequent experience, a standpoint for recognition of and dealing with the world.

## Horizons

Both Heidegger and Gadamer clarify that prejudices are not separable from one's being and being-in-the-world and they do not offer themselves up to management. How then do they change? It seems that in this case my prejudice expanded. Here we need to bring in the idea of 'horizon.' Originating in Husserl's thinking, and extended by Gadamer, the notion of a 'horizon' is both limiting and expansive. Gadamer notes that any situation brings forward our horizon, because it '*represents a standpoint that limits the possibilities of vision*' (TM 302). He then goes on to say:

*'Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded. ... A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small'* (TM 302).

I can see in the story of the bus journey a horizon of understanding that comprised who I was up to that point (my history, language, beliefs, ideas and so on), what was happening at that moment, and all the possibilities for the future that were available to me at the time. I did not, could not, throw away old prejudices and replace them with new ones. I merely extended my horizon. The delight of untrammelled observation on the top of a bus and the terror of being about to be kidnapped in an unfriendly underground station crystallized and gave substance to what had previously been a vague generalization about some good and bad things in the world. I now had these new, more textured arguments available to be put at risk by the next encounter that might bring them to the forefront of my mind. Changing prejudice is expanding it, absorbing it into a broader vision. Mistakes are embarrassing and embarrassment gives the resulting decisions persistence. Mistakes also give us ground for making distinctions; they give texture and direction to life.

## ***Gypsies, black men and merchants***

Few encounters generate reversals of prejudice. Most of them leave me with the same prejudice as before, expanded and given texture. In this last section of the chapter I look again at how prejudice is consolidated, this time in encounter with fear and difference.

At first I could not understand race or class except from a kind of puzzled defensive position. 'I'm not racist!' I claimed. But I noticed that I was intensely aware of race and class and deeply self-protective. My family was part of the British establishment, with its history of white economic and social supremacy. I could feel the fear of losing what we had to interlopers. The British aristocracy have all sorts of exclusionary habits that they use to keep out the riff raff; ways of behaviour, terms of phrase and formulas for marriage being just a few. I could see that to be unacceptable to my own family might be worse than being unacceptable to another. I disliked the divisiveness of the system. I thought I could overcome it, but I found that it was too strong for me.

I was about seven years old and on my bike in Kent, at my grandmother's house. It was a summer's day and the hedgerows were thick with wild cowparsley and red campions. I turned off a lane onto a track and bumped along through a coppiced chestnut plantation. I knew who lived down this way and I wanted to meet them – gypsies. I didn't get within 50 yards. A bunch of children came out from among the caravans, shouting. They stooped and picked up stones and started to hurl them at me. I jerked the handlebars round and skidded on the stones. I pedalled away down the stony track, tears stinging my eyes.

I used to walk down different streets in Brixton when I lived there in the seventies, just for interest. One time, one of many, I was walking along and I could see up ahead some black guys sitting on the front steps of one of the peeling old houses. They saw me coming and growled blackly. I felt my face freeze, fake nonchalance struggling with open fear, steps quickening, eyes shifting from them to the pavement, to the sky, the busy high street up ahead, their whistles, comments and laughter hurting, even as I burst out onto the big street and fled for my front door. I wanted to be accepted by these exotic beings, and to make up for the pain they had suffered from my hostile and arrogant nation. I decided that each race and class played their part as victim or lord in a great dance between the peoples of the world. People seemed to use their powers, whatever they had, to make good.

In the autumn of 1979, I was just starting my undergraduate degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. I saw an announcement on the notice board of the local health food co-op in Brixton inviting people to take part in an Oxfam event in Archway. I went along to a cavernous hall; a schoolroom or a meeting house. We were handed bits of paper each

with a name of a resident of an imaginary Indian village. I remember I was a local merchant. And then we played out the relations between our various characters in the village. I was mean and grasping, indignant and proud. We made a compelling scene of exploitation, despair and resignation. That we made the whole thing up from our assumptions did not enter my head. I thought of it as a window into another world. I felt full of pity for those poor farmers, dislike for the merchants and full of zeal for putting their problems to rights. I understood that I could understand them by putting myself in their shoes. All my assumptions became theirs, their addresses to me were in fact my own.

## **Fusion of horizons**

The expanding horizon that I am focusing on here is the changing but nonetheless singular way I interpreted my experience and encounters. My horizon of understanding expanded in encounter with others and their ideas. It expanded from within itself, differentiating as I added new details. The gypsy children were communicating and insisting on hostility and difference. The experience became part of my horizon and it came forward in subsequent encounters. When I was being the merchant in the imaginary Indian village I brought the angry black men and hostile children with me as characters in my play. Gadamer describes the expanding of horizons of understanding as a 'fusion.' *'In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other'* (TM 306). When I am considering something that is speaking to me from a distance of any sort – in time, space or culture – there is always a fusion of horizons as I assimilate what the person is talking about or doing, and its effect, in a unity of meaning (TM 576). This does not mean a tyranny of a single meaning; there are always discontinuities and disagreements that are part of this unity (Weinsheimer 2004).

A given prejudice proves to be persistent when it is confirmed by repeated encounters. Stereotypes act and are acted upon as stereotypes. In the case of the gypsies I allowed them to be right about our mutual hostility. By the time I met the black people in Brixton, I had already established the expected mode of the encounter, and so had my interlocutors. Neither of our prejudices was challenged as we had co-created a world together in mutual reinforcement. The process of identity formation encourages each of us to be as we have always been and as we

are expected to be by others. Difference and challenge do not necessarily bring prejudice and presupposition into question. Rather, prejudice can persist and reinforce itself as it is confirmed by experience and become a disposition.

## ***The history of effect and the effect of history***

In this chapter, I have dealt with the theme of historicity: my being grounded in a tradition arising from history and its manifestation as prejudice and horizon. Gadamer's clarification of the part played by history in understanding underlines its depth of effect and breadth of potential. Even in this thesis, history is active. Each time I turn to look at history, I add a new perspective to it as it does to me. *'Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice'* (TM 284).

I have outlined just some of the combinations of tradition and encounter that formed the origins and presuppositions of my question about understanding and which subsequently propelled the research. I am at pains to distinguish the psychological concept of 'conditioning', from the philosophical concept of 'historicity' to which I have been paying attention here. Gadamer suggests to me that we are not conditioned by history as if we separate from it; rather we simply *are* our history (Linge 1977: xiv) (TM 262). Historicity is not a state of mind, neither is it an accident that happens to us from which we may escape, but an ontological state, a condition of our existence. It was Martin Heidegger who demonstrated this and its corollary that our own sense of being and understanding always seems self-evident to us (BT 42). It sometimes seems hopeless to try to interrogate it. When we are born into a particular time, we learn the habits of its language and culture and it becomes invisible to us, because it is in this language and culture that we think. Every word that I use is a product of my history, even the 'ands' and 'buts'.

That we then become interested in history and attempt to learn it and interpret it makes no dent on the size of the effect of history on us. History is vast. Even my own history, which is smaller than all history, has an infinite quality, as it

stretches back into time and across geography. It is always much bigger than our historical researches will allow and it retreats from our inquiries into the distance. What I am now is a unity of all that history has made of me and an expression of rebellion against it and towards something new. But just because it is not possible to know it all, does not mean that it is not useful to explore. As an encounter with a person or a text is a potential source of provocation and clarification, so is an encounter with our past.

As part of my more recent studies, I read texts that illuminated the history of western culture. I began to develop a picture of the deep historical roots of the language that I spoke and the mode of thinking that had up to that point seemed to me to be natural and universal. I began, for example, to look closely at the formation of my own culture at its grand turning point in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment, and its unfurling across the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Gadamer refers to the Enlightenment as a way of thought involving perfection of knowledge and an idea that prejudice gets in the way of seeing what is real (TM 201, 205, 270). The pragmatist Richard Rorty suggests that the Enlightenment fulfilled our need to have the human project underwritten by a nonhuman authority. The Enlightenment, he says, *'wove much of its political rhetoric around a picture of the scientist as a sort of priest, someone who achieved contact with nonhuman truth by being "logical", "methodical", and "objective"'* (Rorty 1989:52).

Toulmin helped me to untangle the skeins of the Enlightenment tradition. It was never a single block of ideas, nor an orderly progression, but a refashioning by each society. He unravels the variations of Enlightenment perspectives on truth and streams of influence from different spheres, describing their patterns and textures in different European nations over several centuries and in response to different religious, social and political forces (Toulmin 1990). In these contests I came to see some of a more differentiated substrate to the arguments of my 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

I read Weber and Habermas and I began to see more clearly just how cultural and historically conditioned was my understanding of the world. Of Protestant stock myself, I was struck by Weber's work on the rise of capitalism and its connection



with Protestantism: protestant ethics of labour and investment that made it right and Godly to work, make things, make money and invest that money to make more things and more money (Weber 1985). Weber's description chimed with my own attitude to money, an attitude that I had up till then taken for granted as the only possible attitude to it. Habermas, for his part, speaks to me of disenchantment, differentiation and the parting company of systems and lifeworld, the overtaking of Western society by its own creations of rational administration and economic growth (Habermas 1984a). I was surprised when I realised just how deeply we Westerners believe in the self-evident superiority of administration and money, not only their utility, but their obvious 'rightness.'

I saw that Westerners see things, speak of things and deal with things in a very particular way, born of our history, and that people of one English 'class' or tradition see and speak of essential things differently than those of another. All this culture is embedded in my own language in a way that is particularly mine. That any of the compelling western arguments as to the way the world works and what humans are came to seem to me to be only a brilliant description of the west, but not a universal truth for understanding the whole world and all the people in it, came about because I lived for a long time in another place where people thought quite differently, had quite different stories and resisted coming to agreements with me on what I thought was self-evident. I will turn to this contest of viewpoint in the next chapter.

I have begun with a specific exploration into the historicity that is always at work in understanding and the history that has been forming the changing contours of my inquiry. I have noted the ways in which my horizon expanded through fusion, differentiation and texturing as the people and things that I encountered addressed and provoked it. I have remarked on the consolidation and persistence of prejudice as it sinks into the horizon of the self-evident. I have looked at how my historically effected conceptions framed the question of understanding between people and cultures to which this thesis is addressed. In the next chapter, I go on to discuss how my subsequent experiences, as a development worker in East Africa, brought forward contradiction and question. I work with Gadamer's

version of the hermeneutic circle to explore how and in what way I strove to resolve contradiction between what I expected and what I found.

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## Chapter 4 – A Problem of Understanding

In this chapter I look at my experiences in Sudan, Kenya and Somalia between 1985 and 1996, working in the shadow of two civil wars. Understanding is now clearly a problem. I focus on experiences of incomprehension, thwarted expectations and failure. Understanding appears as a manifold of inexplicable crises propelling me to seek for something concrete, true and whole. By the end of the chapter I have neither understood the situation nor how I might come to understand, but I have clarified the grounds of my problem.

Like the last chapter, I divide the narrative that follows into stories followed by commentary. The commentary is guided by Gadamer and introduces the work of Heidegger. From each story I take a resonant incident and, with all that I was attending to at the time as a necessary context, I look at it closely to see what was going on and what I am thinking now. In each case the understanding of the time had various aspects, but partly to avoid being over-complicated and partly because I find that there is always something that speaks more urgently and begs to be brought forward now, I focus on only one or two aspects of understanding at a time.

### ***Everyday life in Sudan***

Now the world horizon expands before me and I find it strange and stimulating. I enter into a kind of combat with the propositions of my Sudanese interlocutors because they do not fit with what I brought with me. At the same time I am also absorbed into the wonders of their culture.

It was 1985. The rains came and washed the country with green. There was a *coup d'état* in Khartoum and Jaffar Nimieri's government was overthrown by the army. We heard on the radio that General Swahar el Dahab promised to hold elections within a year, and this he did. Sudanese people talked excitedly about the new freedoms and possibilities after years of dictatorship.

We were a gang of ten young English people who stayed on after the famine doing different jobs in the aid business in Kordofan. My husband-to-be, Alastair, came in and out of El Obeid, the provincial capital; he was the Band Aid representative in Khartoum and he travelled all over the country. Band Aid was a fund raised at a multi-national pop concert for the victims of famine in Ethiopia and Sudan. We had listened to it on a crackly radio huddled in a sandy courtyard as the famine raged around us. Then there was Malcolm, who worked for Oxfam. He was doing nutrition surveys, setting up feeding stations for malnourished children and organising nutrition education. Simon worked with Care on what was called 'food security' and James was planting trees for the United Nations. Judith and Mark were teaching English in Dilling, a town to the south and Ken and Sue were in Kadugli, she a teacher, he a water engineer.

Ben and I worked for Care, an American organisation, on a forestry project. At the village wells we made concrete-lined tanks to collect the water from the rows of dripping taps that were always broken. Ben clambered around with cement and earth on his hands. Our project paid local nurserymen to grow seedlings of the gum Arabic tree, which were sold to the villagers to plant in their sandy orchards. I made cartoons of instructions for seedling care, their lines pricked out with a pin and their pages duplicated on an inky hand-operated printing machine. We learned Arabic and spoke simple things to our Sudanese hosts. Ben spoke well; he could rattle off jokes and proverbs. In the office of the Provincial Commissioner of Forests, I sat on the corner of his desk talking excitedly and he instructed me to sit on a chair. One day when he and I were in Khartoum for a meeting, staying at the same guesthouse, he tried to push his way into my bedroom.

We were invited to merchants' houses and ate dish after dish: stews of onions, tomatoes, okra, yoghurt and meat, bowls of steaming millet followed by custard and jelly puddings. As a foreign woman I could go and sit in the kitchens as well as in the men's sitting rooms. We played with babies and touched each others' skin and hair. At Simon and James' we got drunk on Sudanese *aragi*, a vicious hooch and laughed till we cried. At our place, an Mbororo witch doctor with a tattooed face came round and cast spells to stop thieving in our house. Tubes of toothpaste, pens and spoons that we had not missed reappeared. He gave me herbs to cure me of a stomach bug. We went to the cinema with its ceiling open to the stars and watched *Apocalypse Now* with the reels the wrong way round. We went to the little stadium, an oval of sand open to the relentless blue of the desert sky, to cheer *Hilal* and *Mereikh* (New Moon and Stars) the two local football teams.

We walked along the sandy streets to the market and ordered skirts, *jalabiya* and baggy trousers from the tailors. The men whistled at us foreign women and made coarse remarks. I felt insulted and out-of-place. One day we went to the market wearing the bright veils that Sudanese women wore and no one noticed us. But I felt silly wearing those strange clothes. We bought tamarind and peanut butter, hard cheese and round breads. On

Fridays, the day of rest, we would take one of the project cars and drive out between the sandy millet fields and park at the bottom of great ochre and purple granite outcrops. We climbed to the top, sat with the backs of our legs warmed by the crystalline rock and stared across the endless plains dotted with baobab trees. The sounds of the wind, the cries of children in distant villages and the birds wheeling in the thermals filled our senses. We watched dust devils as they twisted across the brown land. I felt I could see all across Africa.

While we felt welcomed by our Sudanese hosts, we seemed to be separated from them by an unbridgeable distance of strangeness. From what I know now, I would say that we brought with us a threat, of which we were entirely unaware. We blithely entered their society with our interferences and they were polite but circumspect. I had expected to arrive at least at an empathetic understanding; instead I found an exotic blank which I filled with my assumptions and imaginings. Our conversations were short and about simple things: weather, food, customs, money and travel. We agreed what to do in our development projects. The people to whom we gave our aid accepted our ideas and finance, but they did not create projects *with* us. If there was something unacceptable in our propositions, the people would assent to the plan and then not carry it out.

In the years that followed I brought a series of development projects to local people which they unaccountably accepted and none of which did much good, while I pursued my resolution to know more. The old sages, manipulative warlords and admirable women of Africa entranced me. The landscape captured me under its huge skies. I thought that if I questioned, looked and learned more and more *about* them, I would understand them and I would eventually be able to come up with a way of doing development that actually worked for all of us. My impulse, based on my positivist scientific and colonial tradition, was to find out what was going on without including me in the equation. I wanted to overcome error with the force of my knowledge and arguments. I wanted to overcome what was immoral and threatening, and I wanted to understand and co-operate with those who were good and right. The people were charming to me and I found the places I went austere and beautiful. My mission to put the world to rights became ever more insistent.

### **Strange and familiar cultural meanings**

And so it was that an idea that comes from my tradition, of changing people, being a missionary, civilising them, putting them to rights, was allowed its largely uncontested space. I continued to believe that if I paid someone else's culture enough attention I could influence it, in a respectful but nonetheless patronising manner. History, lying behind and beyond culture, was of course not amenable to being changed. But I did not appreciate that history and culture are the past and

present of the same phenomenon and it did not occur to me that deliberately developing a culture in a certain direction is a very foolish notion.

The world horizon expanded. The people I met were strange. The landscapes were profoundly different to those I had grown up with. I was foreign here and there was no pretence of sameness. The language I used to understand was of my own tradition, the simple Arabic I talked was translated back to English in my head, and I construed the places I went, the offices, huts, cinemas, houses and hills as being odd, simple, sometimes dusty and uncomfortable, sometimes brightly lit and gaudy, often beautiful and exotic. I knew they meant something different and more sensible to their inhabitants and owners but I could not gain that perspective. Where our sensibilities met, in the hospitality they showed us and our gratitude, we built meaning and laughter together. Where they did not, in all the mysteries of our disagreements about progress and modernity, or justice and individuality, we faced each other across a gulf, or ignored each other as too odd to contemplate. The new world I was in seemed to be separate from mine in its difference. It had a paradoxical quality of being extra bright and extra detailed, because of its difference, while being generally inexplicable and undifferentiated. Provoked by strangeness, I saw and heard things and people with a crystalline distinctness but not with understanding, and I began to feel the world fracture and splinter. I wondered at whose history and beliefs were right and whose were wrong. I wanted to pin it down with scientific investigation, ironically distancing it from my grasp.

I was immersed in a new culture, a system of meanings that invited my curiosity and challenged my sense of the order of things. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains that culture and history work together to create webs of significance, grammars and links, complex structures of science, aesthetics, architecture and engineering, possibilities and impossibilities, desirabilities and terrors and they are all expressed in language (Geertz 1973:89).

When cultures meet, there is potential for different kinds of fusion. On the day the Mbororo magician came to our house, I remember the laughter and mischievous suspicion involved in making a new meaning out of our fabulously contradictory

cultures. It seems that where there is a discontinuity in meanings *and* an openness to explore it makes culture visible and mutable. In our aid worker meetings, or when our gang sat on a granite hill together and gasped at the glory of it, we did not notice that we had a culture. We did not need to observe that our notions of truth and rightness were historically rooted and different from those of other people. Gadamer points out that life orientations can happily co-exist, even when they are quite contradictory. In my encounter with the magician I gained an enriched horizon of what was possible in the world, even if I did not believe all his tricks. Abram talks about the same thing when he describes how an Indonesian family he was staying with put out rice for the spirits. He crept out at night and watched the rice being taken away, grain by grain, by ants. He felt an urge to go and tell the family of their foolishness. Ants were taking the rice, not spirits. He then realized that the ants could be said to be mediating with the spirits (Abram 1996). Gadamer draws on Karl Otto Apel to suggest that in the business of conversing across cultural boundaries about ways of life, *'we are not dealing with relationships between judgments which have to be kept free from contradictions, but with life relationships. Our verbal experience of the world has the capacity to embrace the most varied relationships of life'* (TM 448).

Mostly I felt I was cloaked by my own horizon of strangeness. Yet Gadamer would point out that any sense of a closed horizon around a particular individual is a fiction, a *'romantic refraction'* like Robinson Crusoe and his island (TM 304). I was aware that this was a 'life-world' in which I and the Sudanese were immersed, quite normally. I probed it by asking questions. The Sudanese were careful; I and my like posed a threat. We did not have together the naturalness of interaction between people of a single culture, language, or family, who understand each other without much effort and know how to deal with the threats as well as the opportunities. We had hardly anything that we already agreed on, no suppositions that Gadamer would call *'enabling prejudices'*, the element of belonging to a culture that we could base our conversations upon.

## Connective tissue

Does cultural distance have the same qualities of connectedness that Gadamer describes when he talks of temporal distance? Of the distance between past and present, he says *'the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us. Here it is not too much to speak of the genuine productivity of the course of events'* (TM 297). Is it possible to trace the same sort of ground lying between me and the foreign other? If past is connected to present by myriad links of event, tradition and language, is here connected with there, and us with them? How can we know the thing that a stranger is addressing, except in terms of our own that bear no relation to the idea of the other? Is it here that the possibility of a real chasm of understanding opens up?

Take, for example, the incident in the Forestry Commissioner's office. I put forward an idea about forestry and he told me to get off his desk. I wondered if the subject of forestry was actually two different subjects, his and mine. Perhaps we did not intend the same object at all, even if it had the same name. His notion of forestry related to acreages, resources and his position of power, my notion of it to people, their orchards and our charity. But this is an easy mistake to fall into. We were talking about the same thing, but our descriptions and ideas were different aspects of that thing. Our connection was one of disagreement, and we understood each other on that front surprisingly well. Our protocols demanded that we should not mention any of this. So we dissembled and the result of that was a form of connected distance.

Gadamer's temporal distance is not only bridged by the ground that lies between the past and the present, by our being part of an unbroken linguistic chain originating in prior events. He also points out the immediacy of the relation between past and present, in the present (TM 305). The text may be old, but it is being read now. The culture may be different, but it is being met now. The connection is here and now and the understanding is whatever is heard and interpreted in the moment.



There were understandings in the Forestry Commissioner's office, and they were not comfortable ones. In the moment of encounter between our two cultures, our two traditions met in a dispute with which I was actually quite familiar. Neither of us affected to notice. I was being my tradition, my presuppositions and ways of thinking, coming up against him and his tradition. If I look at the encounter carefully I find the productive connective ground between us. I was sitting on the corner of his desk; I was expressing my culture of easy informality, enthusiasm for speculative technical ventures and a momentary forgetting of gender and protocol. When he responded with an annoyed instruction for me to sit in a chair, he was expressing his status, post-colonial annoyance and the legitimacy of an attempt to exploit my weaknesses. The ground between us was a dance of clashing propositions framed by our traditions. The clash itself was no surprise to me, I had experienced male expectations of female stupidity and availability quite often by then. My hopes of influence over his office were part of the prejudices I carried into my encounters in my work. He had ideas about me and I about him. His ideas of forestry, development, progress, investment, aid, colonialism, leadership, desks, foreigners, women and so on were alive in that room at that moment, as were mine.

Gadamer notes that '*application*' to the present situation mediates between the parties in an encounter in the present and is their connective tissue (TM xxxiii & 309). It is the moment of interpretation itself, in context. Here was the play and dance of the unspoken present between us, here too was the play of strangeness and familiarity that I incorporated into my horizon. The Commissioner and I were on common ground in the play for dominance, within which dwelt the unresolved matter of forestry activities. What at first appeared to be a chasm of disconnection was in effect a connection in the matter and the anti-matter of our conversation.

It was from the things that I saw, heard and thought that my horizons expanded to encapsulate new textures of prejudice and deeper insights into being a foreign aid worker in Sudan. My worldview was enriched by the foreign language and culture that I was invited to meet. Provocations of strangeness and failures of communication stimulated my determination to learn, for I was concerned for my

own and others' success and I felt that we should co-exist and come to agreements. But I had no idea how to achieve these agreements. I did not appreciate what was actually there, so much as search for what was absent: a more theoretical ideal of agreement on technical, social and economic propositions. I paid attention to the distance and not the connections. The result was a rather fragmentary understanding clouded by wishes and hopes, informed by bright and perplexing encounters. I was not a tourist, however, but a person who was part of an intervention and our interventions turned out to be less benign than I had initially thought.

## ***The returnees to the South Sudan war***

In this section, as I spend more time in Sudan and become a professional development worker, I look at the phenomena of moral experiences, irrelevant questions and inconsistent answers. The situations I come across are at first full of harmonious potential and then emerge as distinctly frightening and contradictory.

I built a career as a development professional. I was happy to be in Sudan, asking questions about what people were doing and wanting, sure of my good intentions. I moved from West Sudan to Khartoum, from Khartoum to the south of Sudan. I moved from one organisation to another, in search of a way to be true to the people and the places I was learning to co-exist with. From Care, an international non-governmental organisation based in Atlanta, with which I worked during the famine and its aftermath, I moved on to the Canadian Embassy in Khartoum where I gave out financial grants to women's groups for grain mills and schools. Groups of bright women would gather outside the school building or the hut that housed the mill and sing for me in five and six-part harmony. I was flattered by their gratitude and excitement, but it seemed like a drop in an ocean of poverty.

Then, following my husband, I moved to the United Nations World Food Programme in Nairobi, assessing relief food needs in the war zones of South Sudan, and then on to the United Nations Children's Fund, monitoring education and health programmes for children and women in the same war. While I was hoping to provide solutions to practical problems, I was also in search of an answer to the question raised by the famine and the war. It was, to me, a question of how cruelty happened, and I looked for the answer under every sack of donated American grain, every burned-out armoured car and every roofless schoolroom with bullet pockmarked walls, where the flyblown children chanted from our donated

blackboards. Every week brought a new provocation of violence. One after another we had to abandon places in a hurry where we had been training teachers or equipping health centres. When we returned after the fighting had died down, the buildings were blackened shells and the people had fled. It was dawning on me that our aid was largely ineffective against the monstrosity of the war.

It was 1991, I was sitting at my desk in the Unicef office in a shady corner of Nairobi's United Nations compound. Little sparkling streams ran through rock gardens overarched by bright flowers and gentle trees. Our office looked like a chalet, but it was filled with filing cabinets and computers, procedures manuals and the crackling of the radios talking the never-ending story of weather, war, bombings, trucks and officials moving about South Sudan. Ranks of white Toyota four-wheel drives with shortwave radio aerials and UN in big blue letters lined the car park. I was called to the radio to pick up a message. "Refugee camps in Eastern Ethiopia closed. Hundred thousand Sudanese refugees return Sudan next few days. Send aid."

I got on a plane. My husband, who worked for the UN on political relations and situation assessment, came with me. We arrived at Nasir, a thousand miles to the north. A great curving snake of a river wound itself across a bright green plain. As we banked and turned in the eight-seater Cessna, the sunlight reflected from water spread in great sheets across the horizon. A row of conical thatched buildings marked the land above the floodplain, a levee along the river's edge. A bombed-out town of perhaps 30 buildings, of which only two or three had roofs. We landed bump, bump, climbed down and the plane took off and disappeared into the big distance.

Ten hours in a leaky aluminium boat heading up that sinuously winding river towards Ethiopia, seeing only brown water, grasses, snakes, birds and sky. Then we saw the people coming, at first one and two, tall, carrying bundles on their heads and backs: an aluminium cooking pot, half a sack of grain, a child. In an unbroken line marking the course of the Sobat river, the tens of thousands of Sudanese ex-refugees came towards us.

Then we heard it, a slow deep throb. The walkers heard it too. I saw them turn this way and that, put their bundles down and crouch with them, looking up into the huge white sky. It was one of the Antonov planes from the North, come to drop bombs. I felt a familiar stomach-clenching fear as the sound got louder and louder. A tickling relief when it began to fade. We saw the bombs as they dropped, perhaps ten miles away, on the border crossing at Jekau where the people were coming through from the camps in Ethiopia. A plume of black smoke smudged the horizon. The people stood up and continued their determined walk. After talking briefly to a few of the first walkers, we turned our boat around. We had seen and heard enough to know that it was true that the people were on their way and they would need shelter, food and medicine.

Back at Nasir we set up a camp. We called in doctors and medicine, food, water systems, tents, journalists and experts. The people, on foot, took three days to come. When they arrived they formed orderly encampments, populating the muddy narrow winding strips of land between the ox-bow lakes and the channels of the river. Every day a transport plane would come and drop bags of grain and shelter materials onto a roughly cleared grassy pitch. A smaller plane would land, laden with medicines and tins of food for the workers. We organised food distributions, set up a clinic in the burned-out bat-infested ruins of an old hospital, went about registering people and stores. We lived in tents, and went about in gumboots in the black mud, avoiding the snakes. In the evenings our multinational crew got drunk on vodka and stories of bravado.

A month went by, then two. Why were the people not going home? They were in their own country now. Some perhaps came from places where the war was still raging, but 1991 was a time when the rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, were in the ascendant, and they controlled large areas of South Sudan. This was their territory now, so we assumed the returnees, as we called them, would be free to choose where they went within it. We were wrong.

One day I walked along the line of sagging green tents where a few hundred child-soldiers were being looked after. Wasted and dying. I was sweating under the unremitting sun. I flicked a fly off my face. One of the children gazed at me with gaunt old eyes; he was twelve or thirteen years old. I felt like kicking him. What's wrong with you? And then I understood what I was looking at and what I was part of. The children were being starved just for us. So we would keep on feeding them, so the troops could get their food and medicine. The high-energy food, the antibiotics and the blankets we gave to the children went in the front flap of the tent and out the back to be sent up to the frontline. The children couldn't complain. The tens of thousands of Sudanese people who were being held there, forbidden by the soldiers to go home, were attracting ten tonnes of food a day, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars to fly in from Kenya. The supplies were being used by the local commander to finance his moves to take over the rebel movement by force.

Gradually those who came from the closest places had filtered out of the camps by night, but enough remained to keep our teams of helpful relief workers in a constant state of exhaustion, and to keep photojournalists fed with ghastly pictures of death and suffering. We were part of a great exertion of power over people, and we thought that we were doing good.

I could not fit together what I was seeing and hearing. I thought I would understand if I inquired all the time. I went to talk to women in their little shacks of fluttering material, I sat with old men outside the tall thatched cattle byres, I met the rebel commander with his red and gold epaulettes and gawped at his tales of victories and divided loyalties, I met the man who later was executed in the town jail for speaking out against the commander. I saw his desperate eyes. I talked to the suave UN special

representative who came, apparently, to discuss peace, and to the pragmatic man from the US embassy who came to discuss US interests in the untapped oil reserves that lay under South Sudan. I talked with my colleagues and we wondered about the intractable situation. We asked why things were not improving. We felt a kind of despair as we began to understand the reality we were part of and could not speak of. If our aid saved one life we could not stop bringing it, even if it was contributing to the destruction of thousands. Then four of our colleagues were shot dead by the rebel army in cold blood. And my husband, travelling towards Nasir from the south saw, hanging from trees at the sides of that long road, murdered children whose skulls had been smashed together. The killers were those very commanders and soldiers we were being so polite to.

We aid workers imagined that we were helping to save the lives of the former refugees while their passage home was being sorted out. I eventually realized that we were actually helping to prolong their suffering, indeed we were helping them to come very close to death, or even to die, as part of forced service to a war. I ignored the insistence of this noticing. I allowed the insistence of my own industry and culture to prevail. We projected ourselves as helpful, problem resolving and superior. Near the end of my stay I was bitten by a poisonous snake and was unconscious for three days. I sat for a week by the river, my swollen purple foot propped up on a chair, watching the brown water moving its great weight past the door of my tent. The snake reminded me about the perils of wilful blindness—I had not seen it, I had nearly stepped on its innocent head.

We had seen ourselves as heroes, fighting noble humanitarian battles. Everybody would live, there would be peace, an administration, hospitals that functioned, all financed by the oil that would be shared between all the citizens. But when we eventually faced the question of the difference between our dreams and what we were actually contributing to, we realised that we had no answers. Who exactly would share the oil? Who was to be a privileged citizen of this unformed country and who wasn't? Who had to die for this future? How is it decided who leads and who follows? On whose terms would it be? In our haste to build a perfect society out of the malleable mud of the Nile valley, we were busily helping the elite opportunists. They were the ones building a society. And even if that meant killing, oppressing, destroying, lying and stealing, that was the way it was going to be. We helped out because we wanted to appear to be doing something useful, and we couldn't think of anything else to do. Naïve tools of a political-economic enterprise, we like our colonial forebears, got on well with the locals, as we added to the troubles of the poor and the coffers of the rich. As the insistence of the actual events made it ever more clear that we were being lied to and were lying to ourselves, I considered what to do. All I could do was leave.

A few months later I stood up to speak of my outrage at a conference on humanitarian approaches I found that I was literally unable to speak. I

opened my mouth and nothing came out. My colleagues and I wrote an article in a journal. We received no comments. We had no evidence, no proof, only our own shocked testimony (Dodge, Scott-Villiers et al. 1993).

## Moral sense

The first aspect of understanding that this story raises for me is a question of morals; questions of the distinctions I make between right and wrong. How does my sense of morality operate and what part does it play in understanding? The situation in Nasir was a life and death struggle, with the actions and beliefs of different cultures and powers adding to the excruciation of the moral situation. I judged it, in the end, as a tragic situation and myself as an immoral actor.

Gadamer, drawing on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, points out that moral knowledge always requires self-deliberation, it is not something pre-ordained, nor is it taught. Even if we have an ideal of goodness in mind, the perfection required is in the '*perfect deliberation with oneself*' as an active principle at the time in question (TM 321). He emphasises that moral knowledge is not technical knowledge – 'knowing how' – although it has the similarity of being fully realised in its application, which happens only in the givenness of each situation. Moral knowledge '*contains a kind of experience in itself, and ... is perhaps the fundamental form of experience*' (TM 322).

Gadamer links the ability to be moral (whatever the canon of morality), with being aware of what is there. It is thus a moral act to know well, not to have knowledge as such, but to be able to understand the happening itself, ourselves in the situation, and all that is demanded of us in the situation. '*Thus a knowledge of the particular situation (which is nevertheless not a perceptual seeing) is a necessary supplement to moral knowledge. For although it is necessary to see what a situation is asking of us, this seeing does not mean that we perceive in the situation what is visible as such, but that we learn to see it as the situation of action and hence in the light of what is right. ... The opposite of seeing what is right is not error or deception, but blindness. A person who is overwhelmed by his passions suddenly no longer sees what is right to do in a given situation. He has lost his self-mastery and hence his own rightness – i.e., the right orientation within himself – so that, driven by the dialectic of passion, whatever his passion tells him is right seems so*' (TM 322). In Nasir, in my desperation, I focused

on minor things: mud, tents, planes and boxes of supplies. I watched the sky, the river and the waving grasses. The strangeness was acute. All of our common sense was in suspension, and without signposts to guide it, it dissipated into confusion. If my own experience is anything to go by, it is the way idealistic aid workers wrapped in their sense of pity and panic often confront crises. I was troubled as much by the suffering of the returnees as by my blindness to the workings of the situation. Awareness is not just vague knowing, it is application. In this case, the task was to be engaged with the reality that was in front of me, not with an imaginary situation. It demanded that I deliberate well with myself and thus with others on the central matter at hand instead of paying attention to tents and boxes of supplies.

### **Tragic sense**

Looking back at it now, I see that I was more sanguine at the time than I was afterwards when I raged about it. At the time I understood the fatefulness and tragedy of the situation and I knew that all I could do was act as I thought best. Part of the moral knowledge that is brought to bear and developed in the action of these situations is an appreciation of the dramatic. It is what Gadamer calls 'tragic pensiveness' (TM 131) in which we are able to accept what is going on, what we are a spectator to and part of, because this is the way it has come to be. Without this primordial ability to accept we would not be able to live through what is appalling and what we cannot prevent. These two aspects of understanding, blindness and tragic pensiveness, arise, mollifying moral horror. Emotions and responsibilities fight with one another. Even as I am acting, pensiveness calms me and brings acceptance of tragedy and absurdity into the compass of my capabilities.

Experiences like these cut closer to the bones of living than mere propositions about things or demonstrations of magic. I see and hear more acutely and act more decisively when these things are happening, however much I doubt what I am doing. The working out of an acutely moral situation shows the part played by application in all understanding. The situation demands decisive action, perfect self-deliberation and tragic pensiveness at once.



Understanding came too late, and it came in a rush, like the bursting of a dam. Why? There comes a point when it is no longer possible to lie. Up to the point when understanding broke through, I was protecting myself from howling demented at the gods of that place.

## The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is a description of the way we that we match our projections of the whole of what we are encountering with each part of what we encounter so that things make sense (BT 194). In any encounter we bring forward an expectation of its content and look for coherence. As we hear or see more in the encounter, we reconsider our projection to fit with what we are hearing, seeing or sensing. This rapid and constant iteration usually goes unnoticed, but it comes to notice when there is a difficulty in making the adjustment (Warnke 2003:87).

Gadamer explains that *'we find that meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another .... Not everything is possible; and if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning'* (TM 268). The achievement is when the contradictions are worked out and opened to renewed question.

As we interpret based on what we have already understood, Heidegger shows that we project 'fore-structures' such as fore-sight, and expectation in order to interpret and understand. Without foresight we would understand nothing, because we would have no words with which to ask a question. The effect of foresight is not to make a vicious circle of confirming what we already know, but to make possible *'the most primordial kind of knowing'* (BT 195) by opening ourselves to the possibility that it offers. Heidegger goes on to say, *'to be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but*



*rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.'*

The hermeneutic circle becomes visible when it is broken by contradiction and surprise. My colleagues and I did not expect what happened to these people at Nasir. We thought of them as victims about to be relieved, the commanders saw them as contributors to a war effort, and they thought of themselves as something else altogether. For the relief workers these parts of the story did not fit with our overall expectation. The camp was to be temporary. It persisted. The Sudanese, now in their home country, would go home. They stayed. The children, now being fed with high energy food, would get better. They wasted away. I wondered if the biscuits we were supplying were bad. I did not consider that the food was never reaching their shivering hands, at least not until I was forced to give credence to the idea by a series of other signs that, in retrospect, I could easily enumerate: the soldiers patrolling the camps, the commander's disarming and arrogant charm, the way the people looked at us in desperate resignation, and our failed attempts to get the children onto the planes that we repeatedly organised to take them home. These were matters of politics and war that were not supposed to be under the rubric of my job. I was aware of all these things, but I was not paying them enough attention to bring them forward for consideration, at least not at first. Each of us, the relief workers, the commanders, the ex-refugees, the children, the journalists and the politicians were voicing a single explanation: the foreigners were being helpful but inefficient and inadequate. That explanation fitted with the lie we were all part of, but it did not fit with the evidence.

When questions and answers refuse to coalesce, the suppositions that frame interpretations are brought into question. Gadamer suggests that understanding is always an event, and this particular instance illustrates it well (TM 309). The moment of insight about the diversion of our aid to the front line of the war was, for me, a turning point in my understanding. I could not hold on to suppositions of helpfulness any longer. Other understandings were waiting in the wings, things I had seen and heard, but not fitted together. I reached a point where I could no longer ignore the contradictions in the story we the aid workers were

telling ourselves. Gadamer argues that it is in the nature of being a conscious being that I test what I find against what I have provisionally concluded (TM 268). My prior conclusions may be brought starkly into question.

### **Care and solicitude**

Why be concerned if the parts and whole do not add up? What is it that drives us to question at all? While to be is to make an assertion, to be a *being* is to be concerned and to pose unceasing questions. That we find ourselves in the world and with others is an ontological situation from which, philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer and others suggest, all our behaviours ultimately originate. One aspect of this is what Heidegger calls '*care*.' (BT 83, §12; 157 §26). Because being is being towards what is possible, we comport ourselves with concern for what is coming. We know ourselves to have a future and so we feel a sense of unspecified anxiety for ourselves, concern about things and solicitude for others. In '*care*' we project ourselves into the world and into the future with the formal structure of a question about what is and what may come.

How did I ignore the exploitation of the returnees, something that was demanding attention, and instead focus on providing relief that kept me busy? Heidegger clarifies the existential roots of how we ignore things that matter. It is a '*deficient*' form of solicitude, he suggests (BT 158). There was a buzz of agreement that the relief was important, the buzz was all around me and I contributed to it. It anesthetised my discomfort in the debate about what to do. In a mode of short-term self protection, I made dangerous things unquestionable and argued that they were ambiguous. I paid attention to things other than those that were central to the moral question. I took account of them in only a rather limited '*tranquillised*' way, reducing the scope of my cares. I increased the level of my hustle about small things (BT 222).

### **Loss of clarity**

Where have you come from? Where are you going to? How do you live? What do you need? I asked the returnees. The answers were given patiently, slyly or in exasperation, 'we are from Upper Nile, Equatoria, Jonglei, we have only these

leaves, this fish, these damp grains to eat. We want to go home, but not yet, we cannot go yet, we do not have enough food, it is raining, we are waiting.’ The fore-projections that carried my questions and assimilated the replies were hardly about the supposed subject itself, the returnee family’s real situation. They were about my own cares. I was asking the questions set for me by the agencies for which I worked, the objectives of which were to give out as much food and medicine as we had the capacity to supply. Then maybe we might try to get the people home, where we would continue to assist them and show the whole thing on the TV and in the newspapers. My questions were formed by my concern to fulfil the expectations of my position and my framing of the situation was set by what I felt I was there to do. The questions paid less regard to what was actually there than to the loyalties they were unconsciously fulfilling.

I did not ask why the returnees had not gone home yet, and even if I had, they would not have seen a reason to tell me. I phrased those inane questions as part of an innocence of the tragedy of which I was a part, but also and no less strongly as a member of my culture and institutions. The organizations I worked for and the institutions that guided my community expressed their will through me and alongside me. I was a living expression of the self-concern of these bodies.

Even beyond the participation of my own organisations and institutions, it is possible to see a vague and generalized mode of behaviour in all of us: aid workers, journalists, politicians, victims, oil prospectors, aid grandees, soldiers, government officials—I could go on. ‘I am only doing and thinking what everybody does and thinks!’ This is Heidegger’s notion of ‘everyone’, an unspecific being-together-with-others that is a vague and conforming kind of solicitude. *‘One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. ‘The Others’ whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part ‘are there’ in everyday Being-with-one-another. The “who” is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the “they” (BT 164, §27).*

The inadequate but nonetheless normatively acceptable questions that I asked the returnees on my daily rounds half dulled my worries, because I was doing what

was expected of me. The responses confirmed some of my presuppositions: I had certain powers over resources that people wanted, so they told me what resources they needed and I arranged for them to be delivered. But I also rephrased my questions over and over to try to get below the surface of the situation, with little success. I was making an attempt to understand, but in my bland anxiety the phrasing of the questions that I posed could not penetrate the hiddenness of the matters we all feared to talk about. Invisible backdrops of malign history bore down on our every interaction. Picked from the orderly welfarish notions of our own world, my questions did not reflect the reality of a different world.

### **Fitting questions**

Gadamer tells us that *'what man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now'* (TM xxxvii). In Nasir there was an urgent need to make good moral decisions. Those decisions, as we have seen, might have saved a life while promoting a war, or vice versa. I was deliberating with my own tradition, for the most part with its careless, deficient modes, but also with its ever-renewed moralities. I was deliberating too with the authentic matter of being me, there, then. This embracing hermeneutical structure of small encounters and broad, historically effected preconceptions was fundamental to the movement of my understanding.

While my realization in that camp at Nasir was hardly productive for the practical needs of the people who were there, in a philosophical sense it eventually produced radical understanding. At length I saw the fore-conceptions that I have now described, until then veiled by norms of politeness and institutional position. And then I could see the concrete situation in that place and my relationship to it. It was a long time afterwards, but I took on board how only when we have worked out fore-projections and fore-meanings do our questions disclose the reality that is needed for moral knowledge. We have to be looking straight at the moral issues themselves. At the time I was looking after my own concerns and those of my institutions, and my inquiries were framed by the kind of 'slanted' questioning that avoided the matter at hand because they were actually looking at something else. I return to the question of the true and the slanted question in the

next chapter. First, though, I turn to the effort that I made to overcome the confusion that was the residue of my experiences in South Sudan.

## ***A place at the end of all the roads***

In this section I tell of the years I spent trying unsuccessfully to find a new way of interacting with people in the world of development and humanitarian relief in East Africa. Just as the experience of the famine in the North Sudan had left a great unanswered question waiting to be tackled, so the experience of South Sudan left its own sting. The story now has a mood of vagueness and evasion. I examine how even these states are part of the movements of understanding.

I felt guilty. I had seen terrible things. I believed that I came from a tribe of oppressors and my idealistic industry was, despite its claims and hopes, an oppressive one. The world I was in was coloured by selfishness and cruelty.

We turned away from Sudan, went off into the drylands and lived for three years in the tiny Kenyan border town of Mandera at the end of all roads, in the borderlands where Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia meet. There was one bar and a few restaurants that served tea and spaghetti, two mosques, an army post, a contraband market, barbed wire border crossings and a war going on in neighbouring Somalia. My husband and I set up a small charity and gave goats to people who had lost everything in the war. People liked us in the villages, were suspicious of us in the towns. We laughed and argued and drank Pepsi in the 45° heat.

It was another attempt to do something useful, simpler now, fewer grand questions and grand disasters, but another iteration of what I suspected was patronising intervention. The pastoralists and farmers we worked with told us we had at least a respectful attitude that they could approve of: we gave out resources in the form of animals, with which they were absolutely expert in both technical and political terms. We no longer made the mistake of handing out commodities that could so easily be annexed by the powerful. But the work made hardly a dent on the inexorable difficulties faced by the people of that region. For some time I held on to dogged insistence about the ability of the rural herders and farmers I was working with to be separate from the influence of the warlords, politicians, aid potentates and wealthy families. But I came to see it was these patrons who held so many of the keys to survival, their followers drunk on the power of their rocket propelled grenades, religious texts, sound bites, aid manuals and money.

I thought of myself as being purposefully insignificant. Propelled by exasperation and hopelessness, I stopped thinking very much about the

questions I had been trying to understand and entered into a time of everydayness, attempting just to get things right on a mundane scale. I made deals with warlords to hire cars and with village elders to organise distributions of livestock donations. I did the accounts and trained the staff. I felt comfortable with the Somali women. We set up savings and credit clubs together, sitting huddled close in colourful proximity in reed thatched huts. We talked about the money that was stacked in oily piles in tin boxes in the middle of our circles and when we had finished we talked about the difficult ways of men.

I still felt a sense of responsibility for doing something big about famine, war and injustice, but I had not found a way to do it. So I was looking around, vaguely, for a new way of doing things. I was failing to put a clear name to the troubles I could see and was part of; failing to see how I could do something on anything like the scale that seemed to be needed to make a difference.

I knew by then that the aid industry was doing real harm. The simple equations, empty promises, lack of rigour and dishonesty of our work had come firmly into the foreground of my consciousness. I came to understand the actions of the African elites and aid organisation leaders of all stripes in the light of the most lurid narratives of corruption, exploitation and power. I had believed that I was helping people. My culture suggested to me that our work was good, and I assumed that authorities would have a notion of responsibility and service comparable to the standards I imagined of authorities at home. I expected that people and institutions that had taken on the task of leadership would be pressed into moral intentions and would at least make an effort to be truthful and egalitarian. I found that neither the authorities running the wars, nor those running the aid had these ideals. Instead they lied to us and to themselves; they feathered their nests and looked after their own. When I looked back at what I did in Sudan, Kenya and Somalia, at my attempts to do crisis relief and anti-poverty work, I saw approaches that were opaque, arrogant, fearful and capricious. Hoping for conversation and co-operation, I had instead been co-opted. I spoke development jargon, went to development workshops and could barely think. I realised that lack of consideration and disrespect did not belong exclusively to the bad, to the Other Person, to that power-hungry government or those cruel warlords. Lack of consideration, lying and disrespect belonged to all of us polite people, functions of our failures to come to understandings. My understanding was lost in a miasma of vague sentiments, ideals, theories and anxieties.

## **Evasion and silence**

Telling the story of this period revives in me the torrid inertia of those days. I write a little, get up, drink tea, sit down, erase a sentence, write another, get up, go into the garden. The story speaks of something important but evasive. In

exaggerating the business of alienation, vagueness, incoherence, anxiety and silence, it brings these conditions forward. I am interested in the silence. What, if any, role did it play in understanding? Was it merely pathological and psychological, or was it an ontological element of understanding? I talk of it as if it were pathological, it felt that way – it was a bodily reaction not an intellectual stance. But now I review it, I see a world-induced retreat in preparation for a new assault on the question of understanding itself. I had realised something awful about what we were contributing to. My world structures tottered and fell like old buildings in an earthquake.

In his book on Auschwitz, Primo Levi talks of a '*center of a gray cloudy emptiness*', a place to which he has been eternally opened and from which he will never be freed (Levi 1986). Giorgio Agamben hazards a look into this terrifying place beyond tragedy – the place where there is no humanity left. In interrogating texts from survivors and guards at Auschwitz (not those who faced the Gorgon itself, for they are no longer able to witness), he observes that the shame of having been a part, whatever part, is a confrontation with a dark absence. '*It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own*' (Agamben 2002:105).

Was silence and self-care also a way to stop contributing to procedures I now saw to be dangerous? Was it a way out of a maze? Gadamer points out that a person who wants to understand has to be prepared for the other to tell her something (TM 269). Being-prepared-for-something means making a move towards it. Shutting down might stop the otherwise inexorable repetition of what I already knew how to do, what I was already running from and make space for understanding something new. My tactical retreat was also about taking a rest, which is a state of preparation for what comes after and separation from what went before. And then, it becomes '*tarrying*' as Heidegger calls it, *alongside* things rather than in full engagement with them: '*on the basis of this kind of Being, and as a mode of it, looking explicitly at what we encounter is possible. Looking at something in this way is sometimes a definite way of taking up a direction towards something – of*

*setting our sights towards what is present-at-hand*' (BT 88). It is a distancing that is at the same time an acceptance of future engagement with what we belong to.

## Everyday vagueness

As vague misunderstanding rather than authentic agreement and disagreement became the norm of interaction for me, I began to wonder what was standing in the way of change. During my time in Mandera and afterwards I joined in with what everyone else was doing, the everyday vague understandings, where no one spends much effort to look at phenomena properly; we just talked, did things and made a living. We were all influenced by the generalisations and ambiguities embodied in our institutions, practices, politics and history. Everybody was embodying the situation and was influencing everybody else. It is an everyday state of being in which I was just a busy part of the ebbs and flows of people, notions, news, orders, grumbling, worrying, visiting and so on. I assumed, presumed and was knowing, while sensing that I was waiting for something to change.

Ontologically Heidegger has pointed out that we dwell for the most part in a kind of average state of mind, that comes about precisely because we are concerned with ourselves, the world and others and we are comforted in being at one with the generality (BT §27). While we look and listen for the differences and the distance between us and others, we also ignore them. While we are aware how situations are living up to our hopes and expectations and opening up possibilities, we also divert our attention to small problems. While we sense threats and project resistance, we also pretend their absence. We categorise and theorise about what is typical and predictable to get ahead of what comes at us, yet we muddle the theories together into contradictory notions. We are inexorably part of the push and pull of others around us and contribute to what they are and think. In our everydayness we look for safety in numbers: *'we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back; we find 'shocking' what they find shocking. The "they", which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness'* (BT 164).



Being part of the averageness of what Heidegger calls “the they”, when we are most of the time being an average part of everyone, is the time when our understanding is most imprecise. When we are immersed in this averageness, we do not need to listen acutely, or be deeply considerate, we only need to pick up and pass on generalizations and indifference.

I went to workshops and meetings, filled in progress reports and got on with my work. We all talked, we all made claims, we all knew what we were doing, we all told others what to do, yet I had no clarity on the matters with which we were concerned. Despite wanting to know what was real and wanting to be aware, I also enjoyed being vague and part of the mass; I liked being certain rather than doubtful, supported rather than alone, belonging, not standing-out, appreciated even, part of ‘the tranquillized “they”’ as Heidegger calls it (BT 165). It is the state we all must live in for much of the time. Bill Torbert has a similar thought when he talks about not doing first-person inquiry as much as he would like, *‘I could go days at a time in my everyday life without a single moment of intentional self-observation. Among all my teachers, as well as among all the members of my immediate circle of lifetime friends, I have known of none from whom it seemed easy to fashion her or his version of making-love-as-a-lifetime-act on a moment-to-moment basis. Geniuses have their special arts into which they pour their love ... and they typically have equally strong shadows, arenas of daily life in which they are inattentive, unloving, ineffective’* (Torbert 2001:250).

Sokolowski says of vagueness that it is an ordinary condition wherein we speak without clear thought. We may be failing to ‘pay attention’, be unaware of the ‘meaning of what we are saying’ or perhaps ‘reciting something by rote’ (Sokolowski 2000:105). He notes that many people talk about politics and other public issues in especially vague terms; terms that they have not examined carefully. When we are incoherent, he suggests, whether in what we think to ourselves or say to others, we are not communicating truly, but we are together. The threads of deep communication have been broken and in their place we have fallen back on the camaraderie of fragmentary ideas, false correlations, misty encouragements and vague wishes that we press upon one another.

There are times and places, like the times and places in my story, when vagueness and incoherence develop into deeper vagueness and more incoherence. My colleagues and I designed projects for the betterment of poor people in the same way that we had always designed them, using a series of development theories that promised success just around the next corner. We talked of social change, empowerment and poverty reduction. Vagueness responded to vagueness. I would pick out of the inchoate mists of these bits of jargon some concept—like good governance or gender equality—that I thought was self-evident in its meaning and utility, and assumed that I had agreed something real with aid donors and co-workers. This was all part of what was generally known to be the right thing for development. Heidegger notes that we become lulled by our self-certainty and decidedness as it gets spread abroad. We *'drift along towards an alienation'* and we are *'closed off'* from *'authenticity and possibility, even if only the possibility of genuinely foundering'* (BT 222).

Even as I was being vague, I hated vagueness, construing it as a manifestation of our failure: our disrespect, inaccuracy, distance and complacency. Heidegger notes, *'when, in our everyday Being-with-one-another, we encounter the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not'* (BT 217).

And what lifts the fog of vagueness? I was pulled out of it, I think, by the very questions that it raised. As I realised that I understood little, and as I found myself unable to form a coherent sentence about the issues with which I had struggled for so long, the question of clarity itself moved into the light. Where had clarity gone? Where will it come from? What is it? A *'vague, average understanding'* suggests Heidegger, is the ground of clarification: *'in it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed'* (BT 215). Just as without pre-judgement there would be no direction to our inquiries, without vagueness there would be no reason to make the effort towards clarity. Clarity is an achievement grounded in the everyday.

### ***Problems of understanding – a philosophical attitude***

Understanding, it seems, has its own time. The hermeneutic circle can persist incomplete, with the parts disagreeing with the whole, for years. It is never in fact complete. Gadamer asks how our presuppositions come to be suspended so that new understandings arise. What puts them at risk by opening them to question? He suggests that at a certain point they simply cannot stand up to repeated contradiction (TM 268). In familiar circumstances, when another person addresses me with something in which much has already been agreed, the balancing play of our ideas meets little resistance and our perspectives fit into each other. A fusion of horizons is effortless but the change is small. Where there is discontinuity, as in cultural surprise, we might embrace a kaleidoscopic expansion of our perspective of the world horizon. But I have also experienced, and I hope shown, that discontinuity is not always immediately productive. Where there is discord, contradictions may make not for interplay but for rejection, concealment and vagueness.

Nonetheless, it was the degree of shock and unexpectedness of some of my experiences that threw me into the beginnings of a phenomenological attitude towards my own understanding. Sokolowski describes the phenomenological attitude as a special stance that contemplates the intentions of consciousness and apprehends what is given to it (Sokolowski 2000:63). Normally I perceive, remember, project and engage without paying attention to the relation of the acts to the things perceived or remembered. But from time to time, says Sokolowski echoing Husserl, we adopt a philosophical attitude and attend to the self that is doing all this in as part of the environment. With me, because the parts and the whole still did not add up, because all my understandings remained inadequate, because I was appalled by my encounters, distressed by my moral failures and unable to speak clearly, I began to discover the philosophical comportment towards understanding which grew to become the core of this thesis.

My experience in Sudan was of famine and war. I came up against situations for which I had no preparation, bringing forward a maelstrom of questions about what was right. I brought with me what I held as achievements of learning that I

was unwilling to abandon, prejudices about the way the world worked and the way it should work. It was only repeated challenges from the world that gave me any idea of reconsidering. Some of my experiences, shocking, depressing or wonderful, called forward moral ideas to be tempered as only those situations could temper them, along with an understanding of what it means to be actively moral. I gradually worked on the questions raised by famine and war, foreignness and distance. Pensiveness, silence and retreat to everydayness played its part in being able to mull and understand.

As time went on, when I had returned to East Africa to work on a new project of dialogue as I will detail in later chapters, I noticed how my own tradition had simply entwined with the traditions of those foreign others. This fusion of horizons was not deliberate. I accepted variety and possibility in place of universality and certainty. This historically effected becoming, which was a fusion of cultures, had its own unique expression in me. I see versions of it in many of my contemporaries.

In the next chapter I look at the theory and theorized interventions. Theories about development, about how to understand it and what should be done with it, is strongly influential within the development business. For the most part its panopticon viewpoint gives it a distance from what is happening. It is an industry of prejudice that has the potential to challenge, provoke or ossify understanding.

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## Chapter 5 - Theory and Method

### ***Working on the problem***

In the last chapter we saw my understanding challenged by difference and failure and lulled by vagueness. I was dealing with understanding in its manifestation as a *problem*. It was something not working that demanded to be resolved. I saw my predicament as uncomfortable and confused and leading to unfortunate outcomes. Misunderstanding was, in my mind, a primary cause of the difficulties I was having with getting things agreed and done with others. Expectations did not agree with outcomes. Promises were not kept. My plans, it seemed, were not aligned with those of others with whom I was making them and our communication did not work well. I understood and proposed one thing, they understood and proposed other things, and we did not resolve the differences before acting. The emergent results of our combined activities were not as anyone had willed or desired. Some people did perhaps get closer to their plans and desires, and I imagined that these people were the ones with powers to force outcomes more or less towards their immediate interests while the rest of us milled about in obsequious confusion.

I was dealing with provocations and confusions that called to be untangled, that is, I was dealing with prejudices and questions, and approaching them as problems. Theory and improved method offered ways of resolving the problems. As I conceived it, the problem was lack of effort to understand, exacerbated by imposition of one-sided meaning by those who could exert power using the structural constraints of modern systems of rationalisation. I also saw the problem of misunderstanding as fed by the confusion that inevitably arose from linguistic and cultural differences which needed to be bridged.

By and large, especially when it came to working out the collectively defined arrangements of society, justice and progress on which I was supposedly

working, my stated ideals were not realised and many of my professional relationships were uncomfortable. I noted the effects of the unpredictable environment and saw it as another cause of the unsatisfactory outcomes of our plans; but I saw it as a factor whose effects could be tempered by understanding. I believed that it would be possible to work within a variable and difficult environment if people who were collaborating together, or indeed in conflict with one another, came to deeper, more comprehensive and more realistic understandings about one another, the environment and their approaches. Understanding, for all these reasons, was a problem that could be solved with method. This chapter looks at my next move, towards development theory and theorised intervention.

## ***Development theories***

Theorising about development, about how to understand it and what should be done with it, is strongly influential within the development business. For the most part, its objective viewpoint gives it a distance from what is happening, in order that it may contribute a repackaging of what we understand. The question then arises as to how its insights can be reabsorbed into the lifeworld.

In 1996, I left Manderla and in 1997 returned to England. I joined the Institute of Development Studies and tried to build a new optimism around teaching, facilitating and researching development. It was here that I added active theorising to my attempts to discover solutions. I had been adopting new theories as I went along, development as agricultural intensification, development as economic growth, development as public sector rationalisation, development as rights, justice and security. Development agencies and their staff, bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental alike, took up theory in its more accessible forms and applied it to their plans. Whereas much of the early development theory of the 1950s and '60s was based on Western experiences of industrialisation and growth, later schools took account of post-colonial critiques as well as digging deeper into western norms to produce ideal models of governance, administration and welfare.

While theoretical ideas were central to the orientation of the work of aid agencies, I did not find that they were much discussed by the Sudanese, Kenyans and Somalis with whom I sat and talked in little tea houses and under shade trees, in shabby offices and in the grim hotel meeting rooms where we were tortured with unrelenting 'workshops' on development

practice. In villages I would be invited to hear about land, animals, crops, customs, beliefs and ways of doing things. With colleagues in the aid world I would talk in jargon about ideals of ‘community’ and ‘partnership,’ problems of ‘marginalisation’ and ‘poverty’ and the business of ‘project implementation’ and ‘monitoring and evaluation’. This jargon was the detritus of theory; we used it to proclaim our belonging to the industry, supposedly a shorthand for complex notions, but in effect a lack of precision. Seldom did we talk theory in the way it is constructed in western culture – as a body of rigorous thought. Real theorising went on in particular places, in books and occasional seminars and at the universities. Trying to understand what was wrong with understanding in the development industry, I was following a thread, the thread of theory, towards its origin. Where does theory come from and why does it not it penetrate?

The Institute of Development Studies specialises in development economics, political science, sociology and other human sciences. The scholars categorised, organised and presented the evidence that they collected in the field or synthesised from others and spent less time on the development’s epistemological or ontological constructions. Cohen and Shenton describe the notion of development that was in general use in the mid 1990s as ‘*an intent to develop*’. The phrase embraces both the idea that things and people develop, and that we can *make* them do so (Cohen and Shenton 1996). These two aspects were how I saw the focus of the Institute’s efforts.

I found a pool of theories about the way the people in the world are and should be, and its proponents dealing with it in a plethora of sectors and fields. They were historical products, affected by the past of the disciplines themselves as much as by the languages of the times and the places where they were generated. The fellows and researchers were on an interface between the academy and the aid business. The aid donors (mostly western governments) paid for and had a level of influence on the direction of their research. Writings, observations and recommendations were in some vaguely enunciated way *for* the people who were the subjects of development as well as being *about* them, but likewise the products were for the agencies that paid for the work and the intermediaries who worked *on* development. The thinking projected outwards into the world, making assertions for the most part. Within the academy I think that the scholars understood themselves to be scientific and rigorous, aloof and critical in order to better observe and analyse the world. At the same time the donors needed to be pleased, so they would keep on funding the research. Their interests were often shorter term than those of the researchers. The theorizing that was done at the Institute was practically-oriented, often brilliant and influential in terms of government policies and international aid projects. I admired it. The research offered new frames for the understanding the world along with insights into realities for poor and marginal people in the world. It was rigorously developed and forcefully presented. Nyla Kabeer revealed the lives of woman textile workers in

Bangladesh. Andrea Cornwall opened up the world of sex workers, while Anne Marie Goetz showed us social and political movements in India. Robert Chambers shone a quizzical light on hierarchies of knowledge and John Gaventa on the workings of power. Melissa Leach shattered myths of desertification in Africa. Ian Scoones explained elite control of policy and Mick Moore explained the effects of taxation. Mark Robinson unpacked public sector reform and Stephen Devereux explained famine.

I met Robert Chambers in 1997 and joined the Participation Group at the Institute. I started off running a little library, sending out free copies of material on participation to people all over the world. Before long I began facilitating and researching people's participation in development. I became a facilitator of dialogues aimed at liberating people from being silenced, mostly by researching with and training intermediaries in development agencies. I picked up techniques that allowed the unsaid to be said using diagrams and group discussions. I could distil a fragmentary conversation to a pithy summary or an artful question. I could draw a roomful of people into a new way of considering things with a gesture. I enjoyed facilitating meetings. I liked the feeling of holding a dialogue in my hands and offering people a new way of thinking and taking part. I was suspicious, though, of the feeling of power and exhilaration it gave me; it seemed contradictory to the ethics of humility we espoused. And the results were evanescent, flashes of understanding followed by a return to jargon and enthusiasm for the latest theory.

I found it easy to rest on the laurels of our global efforts in the self-congratulatory world of participatory development. It was easy to see our espoused love of people and planet and our endless debates and participatory inquiries as evidence of rightness and even progress. I blamed the aid agencies, the politicians and the governments for their mistreatment of the poor. I went along with the participation crowd when I said things like, 'communities should be consulted', and 'we must work in partnership' and 'the people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives'. It meant almost nothing in real life.

My colleagues and I aimed to create understanding and help liberate people from oppression. Sometimes extraordinary people did us the honour of coming to the Institute to take part in our inquiries and events, bringing with them the fervour of their passionate lives in the favelas of Sao Paulo or the slums of Johannesburg and Delhi. I admired Paolo Freire, Augusto Boal, Robert Chambers, John Gaventa, Andrea Cornwall and Orlando Fals Borda; scholars who took action on their theories in inventive and egalitarian ways. Chambers was, is, a riveting speaker and a humble man. He pointed at us and told us that our realities are '*universalist, reductionist, standardised and stable*', while the realities of poor people are '*local, complex, diverse and dynamic*' and '*you do not understand each other!*' (Chambers 1995). Robert was closest of all of us to considering the philosophical matters that underlay our situation, but even he was diverted by the urgency of putting things to rights. He had a notion that if we, like



him, saw what should be done in order to be good, then we would do it. But few people ever really did, they only pretended. They took his ideas of coming truly close to people in a real and phenomenological way and made self-serving versions of it. The villager was placed in a high chair and the visitor from overseas sat in the dust at his feet and asked him annoying questions, and came back and wrote books about it. Robert focused on development hypocrisy with disarming humour, but I think he assumed that once we had '*seen*' the error of our ways, we would all change. What we got instead was a preening jargon around participation.

The participation arguments were not working for me, because I could see they were not working in the places I cared about. The understandings we achieved with local people, NGO representatives and bilateral donor officials in a hundred different countries were always ephemeral. The farmers and textile workers, administrators and bureaucrats performed the participatory exercises we set for them and we found ourselves in possession of diagrams of their institutions and maps of their land, or their farms, their offices or their gender problems or whatever the subject was. They were explaining things to us, and I suspected that they told us what they thought we wanted to hear. I shook with frustration. I noticed that I said less and less as I lost hope that anyone would ever be able to dislodge the ossified structures of what appeared to me to be exploitative and denigrating power relations. What I did say made no sense to me. In seminars and university events I did not speak much. I could not formulate any point that seemed worth making.

I embarked on a detailed inquiry into where my own understandings came from and what they were: my culture, history, point of view and assumptions. What things mean to me, which are then the starting point for my questions and conversations, are rooted in who I am -- in my '*identity, origin and locality*' (Chabal 2009). They are developed through my interpretation of, among other things the morality, rationality and institutional logic of my own society and experience. I concentrated on the dialogue that I conducted without cease with my own culture. I wrote down the stories of my life, my absorption of the acceptable and ideal as I grew up, my encounters with perplexing difference and horror, with famine and war. I spent some time examining the institutions which framed my rights, obligations and values, and compared with others that belonged to other peoples. I read and wrote about being an English twenty-first century woman.

Gradually I came to see the theories of the West were just that, not the reality of the whole world. I saw at last that the understanding that I had about the world, ontology, epistemology, economy and a hundred other '*ologies*' were of their time and place. They were not of all horizons. These new understandings were mine, a contextualised adaptation of a local norm, rather than being universal. I began to notice that my own horizon differed from and entwined itself with other horizons, other parts of the world horizon. In all this, the gentle, detailed and convivial voice of Gadamer accompanied me.

I was surrounded by excellent thinkers and new theories expanded and added texture to my theoretical horizons. I was compelled, for example, by a version of dependency/post-colonial theory in a paper by Mark Duffield: *'A small part of the world's population consumes and lives beyond its means within the fragile equilibrium of mass society while the larger part is allowed to die chasing the mirage of self-reliance. Rather than addressing these divergent life-chances, the securitization of development is further entrenching them'* (Duffield 2005: 141-142).

I also read the political economy work of Jean-Francois Bayart and it seemed to parallel what I was encountering in my own travels. I appreciated his appreciation of the sheer Africanness of Africa and how its varied peoples made sense to themselves and could therefore make sense to us, if we let them. I loved his zest and humour, even-handedness and admirable way of description:

*'Inasmuch as it is a plural space of interaction and enunciation, the state [in Africa] does not exist beyond the uses made of it by all social groups, including the most subordinate. The state buzzes with their constant murmur: the murmur of social practices which tirelessly fashion, deform and undermine the institutions and ideologies created by the highest of the high; the murmur, above all of Radio Trottoir (pavement radio) or its white collar counterpart, Radio Couloir (corridor radio) which insolently ignore the embargoes of the censors and obstruct the totalitarian designs of government and its 'legitimate problematic' with their black humour'* (Bayart 1993:252).

When I heard these ideas I merged them into my own thought. Poor people and refugees in Africa were engaging with hegemonic forces and they were dipping and diving with the systems of patronage and opportunity as impressively as anyone could be expected to. I came to new admirations and intimations of possibility. The new theories, analyses and framings made articulate what I had seen. They were empirical, plausible and cogently argued. But I was, in effect, continuing my old approach of finding out, knowing, boxing in and hoping to control and change the unruly and morally-insulting world of the poor. This objectifying stance did not quite fit with the experiences of twenty years of fusion of life horizons that I had been living in East Africa.

I could not find evidence that the scholars' insights and the new formulations were in dialogue with the understandings of poor and rural people I met in East Africa. Research seminars, publications and websites were stimulating conversations that got nowhere near the places where the poor themselves were. For every theoretical framework to categorise reality there was elite self-interest to distort and ossify it; for every new analytical formulation there was an institution to apply it out of context; and for every critical insight there was a gulf that was not crossed to a dialogue that it should have stimulated.

## Critical distance

Heidegger divided the world of which we are conscious into three categories, '*conscious beings*', the '*ready-to-hand*', and the '*present-at-hand*'. Entities that are *ready-to-hand*, he said, are understood in the engagement we have with them, their usefulness and possibility. Entities that are *present-at-hand* are abstracted; they are what we see when we objectify. They are unreachable, but they could be categorised and measured. Consistent and clear categorisation attuned to the needs of the present and future is useful to many people, for example those who make policies, organise bureaucracies or develop, manufacture and market products. I read from Heidegger, however, that to be useful science needs to be clear about its limits and manipulation of abstractions. He says, '*by looking at the world theoretically, we have already dimmed it down to the uniformity of what is purely present-at-hand, though admittedly this uniformity comprises a new abundance of things which can be discovered by simply characterizing them* (BT 177).

Social science mostly does not find ways to clarify to the layperson the epistemology on the basis of which it considers the things that it considers, and the layperson has for the most part an attenuated version of the original. Neither has much of social science usually made clear to its non-academic readership the researcher's own historically-effected consciousness in the formulation of the research, despite the central role of the researcher and her or his tradition in the understandings that are developed. The people who are researched, at least the ones I have met in East Africa, tend to be forgotten as beings with meanings and consciousnesses of their own, and interest in what researchers are saying about them (Chabal and Daloz 2006:4). Much of what is called participatory research involves getting people involved a little more than had been the norm before, but the frame of thought is still dominated by the concepts of the researcher. In other cases participatory research suffers from a lowest common denominator effect as concepts of hermeneutic rigour are not agreed. There are, of course, all sorts of innovative approaches to research that attempt to remedy these shortcomings, action research being just one of them (Reason and Bradbury 2001a). But this is not so much a point of method, but a point of hermeneutics. Any form of research and theory can bring resonant insight when it works within and makes clear its

own grounds, clarifies its limits and engages in the equivalent of a conversation with its readers and users.

Much of the scholarly work that I have read on development attempts to be as plain and practical a representation of what is 'out there' as can be expressed intelligibly within an acknowledged conceptual frame. The flaw that I am concerned with is in its communication and discussion. A conceptual frame may be made with a view to subsequent refutation and reformulation and its role may be to contain a contextualised description and argument, but people that I have met in government offices and aid agencies usually only pick up the frame itself, and any sound bites that the studies offer. These frames have influenced entire decades of development practice. Take, for example, the public financial prescription of 'structural adjustment' or the current notion of 'social protection'. They universalise what is in reality specific to each context. Research users often ignore the rich context expressed in the original work. The frames, in my experience, have the effect of pre-packaging reality into shapes convenient to the 'policy-maker'. It is as if natural laws are being found and packaged for these thirsty types. Gadamer said that a scientist who has discovered a law of nature has it in his power (TM 450). Here it seems that the power to define natural law in social sectors is handed to the policy-maker and pundit, a direction that does not recognise the fundamental role of agreement of multiple people in coming to understandings about social affairs.

Theoretical thinking has produced a wide array of different descriptions of the way the world is, and in its turn, but in rather less detail, these descriptions have affected the worldviews of leaders and bureaucrats and the rules and modes of institutions. These articulations, distinctions, disruptions and discontinuities can become fashionable modes of consciousness. The flow of new understanding is interrupted when an abstract consciousness becomes all that anyone needs, being considered the right way to divide up life, and being true for everyone, always. The users of academic products in the development sector are less concerned with concrete objects of policy, business, industry or society, than with coalitions around one framework or another.

For many development theorists critical distance is an essential part of their method and epistemology and the question follows as to how academic thinking is being reabsorbed into non-academic life. People in the development sector who use social science to think and decide on courses of action and ways of perceiving the other seldom see its full context. Development theories about people in East Africa are not reaching many of the people I met there, except as the jargon and tropes they pick up from development agents. The kind of science that tends to be adopted by the development industry, considers 'ordinary' people as having neither the capacity, nor the interest, nor the need to debate and have meanings. As such it contributes directly to my concern about lack of respect and its consequences.

## **Lifeworld**

Much social science has a tendency to 'float' detached from the realities it reports on. It establishes and maintains a distance between the things and people under investigation and the consciousnesses that apprehend them (BT 50, §7). In so doing, suggests Gadamer, theory is complicit with a '*fatal immunization against experience – for example, against that of common sense and the experience one gains in living*' (TM 555). In my own quest to understand how understanding happens, I came to agree that there was plenty of understanding before and beyond theoretical and scientific knowledge. If I concentrated only on the reality shown to me by the social sciences I would grasp the explanations, but I would miss the possibilities of being and the actualities of lived worlds, which are fundamental to coming to understandings with others, even in theoretical and scientific realms.

Gadamer questions whether methodological alienation is really possible (Linge 1977). Researchers are not actually detached from the subject matter. On the contrary, they are deeply involved. If some are imagining themselves to be outside, maintaining objective distance, they are then failing to recognise and account for the context of their work. They miss an opportunity to discuss what they are 'finding' with the people they are investigating and thereby perhaps agreeing something new about the lifeworld they are a part of. They would be immunizing themselves against life.

The lifeworld is a term coined by Husserl to convey the ‘world of lived experience’ (Husserl 1970; Moran 2000:181). It is everyday lived consciousness and its practice. Heidegger’s version of the lifeworld is a world that is available – it is practical, embracing and we belong to it. According to Husserl, science and theory arise from the lifeworld; they do not stand truly apart from it. While Husserl proposes that science is a stance motivated by ‘intellectual curiosity’ and playfulness, Heidegger suggests that science’s way of being objective is a ‘deficient’ mode of ‘being’. Science is not separate from or superior to the lifeworld, but emerges from it. It is framed and explored in it, and it is plunged straight back into the lifeworld as soon as its theories are expressed. As Rorty puts it, *‘there is no deep split between theory and practice, because on a pragmatist view all so-called ‘theory’ which is not wordplay is always already practice’* (Rorty 1999: xxiv).

I have also found that social science is constantly admonished by real life. The people that I meet in Africa who are the subjects of theory have always moved ahead of and beyond the reach of theory. They behave differently than expected, because, like the rest of us they live in the lifeworld. When complicated meanings are reduced to multi-part diagrams backed by universalising statements and when the rich texture and variation of living is forgotten, I feel justified in my suspicion of theory. And to me, it is feckless for theory not to be taken back into a conversation with those about whom it is theorising, instead projecting itself into arcane debates between interesting, but nonetheless thinly concerned people. My discomfort with the business of theorising is not when it plays with the possibilities of life, but when it stands aloof for too long. If the reason for aloofness is rigour, rather than epistemology, then I can argue that it is possible to be playful and rigorous at once, as has been shown by numerous different people over the ages, in science, literature, sport, art and many other walks of life.

## **The life of theory**

In circumstances where people come together across gulfs of cultural difference and incomprehension, where the question of what is right is in dispute and new ideas are being contested, what most of us want is a kind of best-possible agreement. From a pragmatist perspective, the sciences have a problem of

universalising. Richard Rorty argues that what we are actually doing when we say things are true is saying that the distinctions we are making are good and workable for now; they are based on our experience, but they are not universal for all time and all people (Rorty 1999: xxvi). A working agreement makes it possible for us to agree, if we are not so dogmatic as to think we have finished our task. Local meanings are not less, but more true than universal meanings. Debates around universals need constant nourishment from the ground (Judith Butler cited in Marshall 2004:133). In the same way practical meanings nourish abstract ones (Eikeland 2001).

Without going any further into an old controversy about reality and theory, I will close this section by returning to the progress of my own understanding. What theory gave me for my purposes was insight into my own tradition and fore-conceptions. It was and remains a deeply interesting exploration, even though I found much of it debating only with itself and I wanted to find a way by which it would debate beyond itself, back with the people living in the lifeworld again. Such a notion is tricky when the self-understanding of social science is such that it will only accept as true that which follows its own rules – a tendency common to all kinds of consciousness. Orienting theoretical research in ways that encourages traditions to speak to each other in inventive conversations is not the way of most theorists nor their financiers. Nonetheless, theory is another kind of prejudice, and has its same potential.

One area of theory that I have already touched on is the area of participatory idealism. In the next section I turn from development theory in general to the particular realm of theories of emancipatory participation and their practical application in the art of facilitated dialogues.

## ***A struggle with facilitating participation***

Facilitation has theoretical underpinnings in notions of participation and inclusion and their potential for helping to create stable and happy societies. A staple of public sector attempts to get closer to clients and a branch of research aiming at democratising and increasing the scope of knowledge, facilitation has



been surprisingly unsuccessful, I think, in helping people in development to reach meaningful understandings with one another. In this section I look at my repeated attempts to make it work and ask why I was dissatisfied with the results.

When, in 2002, I started to study for my doctorate, the question that concerned me was how facilitated dialogue might make a helpful contribution to understandings across cultures. The art of facilitation, as I understood it, supposed that inserting a new, fair, mediating power into dialogue between people who were different would help overcome obstructions to agreement and innovation created by social divisions. Facilitation could, I thought, help untangle communication between people who had different ways of expressing themselves, divergent foundational beliefs and kaleidoscopic understandings of how the world worked. I knew that behind this lay the question of whether or not facilitation, even at its most skilful, did these things. So I asked the question ‘what is skilled facilitation?’ To test the hypothesis of utility, I would first need to achieve a level of skilled facilitation that when applied to the world, would achieve results for respect, innovation and co-operation. I needed to believe in the effectiveness of good facilitation. I had to try repeatedly to improve it and make it work and continue to hold it up as a marker of my identity and pride.

For several years I had been facilitating meetings whose objectives had been to improve co-operation between the people who worked for the organizations that drafted policies, made laws, laid on education and health services and spoke on behalf of poor people, and poor people themselves. Facilitation meant planning and guiding public discussions. It involved, in my case, meetings of anything from 10 – 100 people, often a mix of citizens and officials, professionals, politicians, producers, traders, students, aid workers or researchers. I would chair the meeting, make introductions, pose questions, draw out opinions, bring ideas together into frameworks, organize analysis in small groups and encourage people to come to conclusions. These meetings were parts of communication projects, efforts to bring the voices of poor people in to policy debates, efforts to change the way NGOs engaged with those they raised money for, or the way donors understood their responsibilities. The projects entailed trying to explain the context of people’s participation in policy, public decisions and public organisations.

I saw that facilitation could stimulate intense conversations and glimpses of new insight, but as the people left the meeting, they let go of these fugitive insights and returned to where they had left off. Despite bright inspirational moments, new ideas and understandings between different types of people evaporated quickly, leaving little trace. A discussion about the deficiencies of aid and the possibilities of doing things differently would rouse ideas of listening to poor people in new ways, changing our official approaches and personal attitudes and yet my colleagues and I would return to our offices and our engagements with poor people and most of us wouldn’t make a single substantial change to our ways of working. Our offices demanded plans and expenditures, so we made plans and expenditures. There was little



opportunity and not enough understanding to act differently than we had done before.

However much I tried to adapt my ways of speaking and acting, arriving in village or slum and introducing myself with due respect, arriving in a ministers office with due coolness, making suggestions for fair co-operation with poor people, spending money in harmless ways, I felt that I was kidding myself. I blamed our failures on power, money, history, and culture. I did also, secretly, blame the poor, blighted others for being hopeless. For those of us working in or on Africa, whose statistics indicated inexorable poverty, corruption and illness, there was a seductive argument that Africa was, as Chabal puts it, *'fated never to manage to resolve its problems.'* I had already caught myself and others contending that its problems were inevitable and intractable, Africans were *'cursed by their own traditions'* (Chabal 2009:15).

I thought that perhaps the new ideas and concepts proposed by participation theorists needed to be iterated again and again until they became understandable. But it was my experience that repetition of a word like participation led to a dimming of the reality of what was talked about, until it became a meaningless cliché rather than a possibility of something concrete. At first I had at least a passionate ideal, concrete if impractical, later all that was left was a cloud of fuzzy thinking. The disrespect that I saw in the world continued unabated.

I led workshops for development workers in which we reviewed the shortcomings of our approaches. We absorbed Chambers' insights on the behaviour of 'uppers' and 'lowers' (our places in hierarchies) and of the educated (our blinkered intellectual framing of the world) (Chambers 1997). I attempted to use the participatory tools he had taught us. I made diagrams of livelihoods and dreams with mothers in Kibwezi, development workers in London, pastoralists in Wajir, slum dwellers in Lusaka, people on welfare in Hull and Bristol, in the sand, on the pavement or the carpet with sticks, beans, string and marker pens, and despite creating sometimes quite beautiful and multi-dimensional diagrams, I did not feel we were coming to real agreements. I felt that my facilitation techniques were lacking the requisite art that would draw out and sustain our capabilities to know, act and be together differently.

I was asking how I might facilitate better. I was in search of method. I analysed the minutiae of our conversations and workshops and looked at the dynamics of who spoke and how. I sought to level the playing field in the debates that I facilitated, to allow even the quietest and the most oppressed person to speak and be heard. I tried every kind of trick to liberate collaboration and inspiration – small groups, buzz groups, theatre scenes, open spaces, matrices, timelines, diagrams and maps. I would ask people to write their ideas on little bits of paper and stick these on larger bits of paper, then rearrange them into categories and review them. I did it in Brighton and Bangladesh and in Brazil. Chalk and cheese written on pastel coloured squares, these scraps of paper were disparate collections of foreshortened notions, decoupled from their origins and meanings, forced together and turned into a list of five bullet points.

Perhaps I thought that someone was talking too much, and drowning out the opinions of others. I dug into psychological realms. I assumed that the person perhaps did not realize her mistake – she felt she had something important to say. Or she was unable to control herself: she said, ‘I talk too much,’ and then carried on talking. She is not being listened to elsewhere, or she is in the habit of being the boss, or she wishes to fill in awkward silences. Techniques presented themselves to rebalance the conversation, perhaps a listening exercise or a role reversal exercise. I gave each person a turn, or I would suggest drawing, theatre, or other tricks. And so it went on.

I began to wonder if the problems were not trust and meaning, which were not going to be overcome by tricks. The before and after of any conversation and the invisible influences everyone brought with them and were striving towards demanded not merely facilitation but something much more fundamental. Still I continued to look for a method. My sense of identity and contribution depended on finding one. By now, my critique of the methods we employed had become quite fierce. Not only was the context not given its due, the before, after and around, but neither were the cadences of people’s thought and conversation respected, despite our claims. As Abram said of literate and oral cultures coming together,

*‘We must strive to free ourselves from our habitual impulse to visualize any language as a static structure that could be diagrammed, or a set of rules that could be ordered and listed. Without a formal writing system, the language of an oral culture cannot be objectified as a separable entity by those who speak it, and this lack of objectification influences not only the way in which oral cultures experience the field of discursive meanings, but also the very character and structure of that field’ (Abram 1996:139).*

In 2004 I began to read about different epistemologies in an effort to understand what was happening when I was facilitating. Drawing from the work of Guba and Lincoln, I asked whether I was trying to uncover universal truths with people, or taking part in constructing temporary realities out of multiple perspectives (Guba and Lincoln 1994:105; 2000). Nietzsche howled at me with savage freedom and poetry. He sang of bravery and honesty (Nietzsche 2003). Selfish, generative, cruel and brilliant, like Whitman and America, he screamed at me for being distanced, bureaucratic and deceptive. He pilloried my way of pitying the poor. ‘Enjoy yourself and don’t lie!’ he threw out as he danced off into oblivion. Still obsessed with method, I asked myself if I could make my facilitation braver, more poetic, more diverse and more effective. Would it help the people I encountered come to understandings with me?

I read Rorty and tried to incorporate his insights into the events I facilitated. The world is out there, he said, but our understanding of it is always historically contingent and we face an infinity of interpretation at once limited by our historical situation (Rorty 1979; 1999). Our agreements should be for the best for now, not universal. I would encourage recognition and validation of a variety of truths from different cultures and histories. But at the end of the event, feeling pressure from outside to conform to norms of achievement and

value for money, we pushed variety aside and summarised the many into the one. We came up with a concluding statement that forced together twenty truths into bland lists, or we did not, leaving with only confusion to take back to our bosses.

Rorty also suggested to me that progress with human happiness came about through imagination and new descriptions of things: '*a talent for speaking differently rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change*' he said, and '*to change how we talk is to change what, for our own purposes, we are*' (Rorty 1989:7). To have new vocabularies we would need to take risks, be poetic and shift our attention from epistemology to politics, because '*political freedom has changed our sense of what human inquiry is good for.*'

Could facilitation and a focus on political engagement encourage re-description and make a new contribution? I thought it could because I understood that within political freedoms lay the ability to speak and be heard, but I didn't know how, and I continued in my search for a method. I was inspired by Amartya Sen writing on development as freedom (Sen 1999). My work in East Africa became more political, I had a sense that the conversations that I facilitated there were about building political strength with those who had none of it, and breaking down political barriers to negotiation.

At length, when even after all this I found myself still in the same place with regard to finding brilliant ways of promote change across the divides between different cultures, poor, rich, male, female, European, American, African, I turned again to the question of whether my facilitation work was having *any* lasting effect on reducing the gulf between us at all. I considered the possibility that most aid and development workers did not want to change the normality of their lives. It seemed that they and I were inextricably embedded in our labyrinthine industry, fixed in the orbits of my social and geopolitical positions and pinioned by the expectations of a dominant Western culture.

In 2005 I examined the situation where I was working in Ethiopia in terms of political economy, in a bid to understand why facilitation was having little useful effect, as far as I could see. I looked at the competing and colluding interests of national elites and international players, the reverberations of a colonial past in present behaviours, and the systems and structures of patronage and patrimonialism at work in even the smallest village (Hagmann 2005). I spent several months interviewing people in different parts of Ethiopia, pastoralists and shopkeepers, manufacturers and politicians, aid workers and officials hoping to find ways of reframing what I saw as a worrying situation of political violence. What I found was an economy and vocabulary of fear (Scott-Villiers 2005). I found that everywhere people yielded to power and took part in perpetuating Foucaultian discourses that led them into restricting their own capabilities by accepting institutions that imprisoned them (Foucault 1995).

Considering Duffield on the biopower of the rich nations over the poor, Bayart on the rhizomatous patronage networks of Africa, Foucault on the inextricable

mazes of European normative administration, Habermas on the decoupled steering systems of bureaucracy and economy, and Fanon and the Black Atlantic writers on the excruciating pain of colonial repression, I concluded, that with all this power and history, facilitation of idealistic dialogues was worse than useless (Habermas 1984a; Fanon 1986; Foucault 1995; Jain and Singh 2000; Duffield 2005; Baucom 2006). I and the people who took part in the events I led were not likely to take the huge risks needed to deal with the problems we are talking about. The participatory idea that everyone could contribute in a small way, thus making it less risky for the bravest ones, did not play out in reality.

In the summer of 2006, I helped facilitate a big gathering of pastoralists from across Africa, held at a tented camp that we had built in southern Ethiopia at a place called Qarsa Dambi. The chair of the meeting was a pastoralist leader called Nura Dida. He led the sessions when all 300 of the delegates came together under the central tree, and I was tasked with running the group sessions on substantive issues. In my sessions different constellations of pastoralists, government and NGO agents argued about drought and animal breeds, trade and community organization. I found the discussions interesting but inconclusive. I was only vaguely aware that the part of the meeting that was to have any lasting effect was actually taking place around the back of the tents, a vigorous series of small engagements that were proposing agreements between different pastoralist groups for keeping peace and dealing with political stresses. When I did understand it, after the event, I appreciated my diversionary role.

Nonetheless, I decided that I could quite safely stop imagining facilitation by foreigners to be at the centre of processes of social renewal. I understood that people would find generative causes and understandings when they rooted them in their own histories and projective directions. They would not find them when they were proposed by technicians and theorists. No false equality, fleeting goodwill or deracinated concepts would help them. My question found its focus. I no longer needed or wanted to know how to do facilitation better. I no longer wanted to know what facilitation did or didn't do. Rather, I wanted to know how people came to understanding, where it came from and what effect it had.

## **False, slanted and true questions**

When a prejudice comes into the open, Gadamer remarks, its validity is suspended and its previous state of self-evidence and naturalness evaporates. It becomes just a provisional judgment. It takes on '*the logical structure of a question*' (TM 299). In the stories of my struggles with facilitating discussions and meetings I was repeatedly provoked by my failure to live up to a promise of producing agreement and understanding. I had a prejudice that skilful and methodical facilitation would be effective in promoting agreement, and I looked for better

approaches. Only after some time and under sustained provocation from Gadamer and the world did the possibility arise that my focus on method was missing the true question that the situation was asking of me.

Questions, Gadamer notes, '*open up possibilities and keep them open*' (TM 299). He suggests that a question is 'slanted' if it does not foreground its pre-supposition and intend the real issue that has prompted it. It has the spirit of a true question, because there is a question behind it and openness is intended, but since the presuppositions are not opened to refutation, nothing can be decided from it (TM 364). A false question is a closed question, one to which I already know the answer. There is no strengthening the argument of the other, no possibility of ignorance from the questioner and no possibility of truth from where the reply is to come from. A true question is the opposite, it is open to the potential truth of the answer, to the alterity of the answer and to its coherence with the whole of which it is a part (Warnke 2003:111). The slanted question lies between these two – it is a question that lacks skill rather than one that is opinionated. It is muddled (TM 362-369).

My question about a good method was a slanted one. I was being provoked by misunderstanding, disagreement, disrespect and distance. But I did not ask what they were and what they were not, when they happened and when they did not. Until I identified the true question no answer could be given and no decision could be made (TM 364).

Questions have sense, which means a 'sense of direction' (TM 362). The question comes from somewhere and everything about it – its subject matter, language, time and place – orients it in a direction from which its answer must come. Question and answer are bound together – the history and reality of what the question is about defines the direction from which the answer must come and the potential of the answer defines the question that fits it.

My question about good facilitation originated from concerns with being effective according to the norms of my world. These norms oriented the question towards answers about technique. I derive the notion of technique from my education in cause and effect and my admiration for science. I phrased a question about

technique that was embroidered with the terminology of psychological and political science that explained why people do or do not speak, and why they do or do not generate conversations that give them new understandings. The answer to the question of technique came from the direction towards which it was pointed, from social theory, psychology and method. Try this, try that, said my colleagues. It is caused by this, it is caused by that, they asserted. Trying to discover the reasons why skilled facilitation was not working to create dynamic understanding, I expanded the scope of my inquiries beyond matters of psychological technique to include a broader landscape.

### **The limits of methods of understanding**

The primacy of method is a hallmark of Western tradition. Meanwhile Gadamer was worrying me. I was perplexed each time he suggested that hermeneutics is not a method but a field of philosophical insight. If aid did not have much time for politics it had absolutely no time for philosophy. Surely hermeneutics is an art? Surely it is something that I can learn, something that can be done better or worse? Gadamer raised the possibility that there might be something beyond method in the realm of coming to understandings. He was making a cogent argument for a contrary view to my own. He spoke from somewhere close to my own tradition. He gave me an opportunity to make a distinction between the utility of method for science and its inadequacy for the life of human understanding.

In development agency discussions, officials, volunteers and aid recipients pretend to ignore politics, even while members of the academy attempt to draw their attention to it. I have met many people directly involved in disbursing the millions donated in aid who want to distance themselves from the accusation that we work in a political industry involving gross manipulations of power, resources and institutions. I, like them, saw myself as a pragmatist allied to the social sciences and bureaucratic neutrality. I tried to approach my work scientifically, putting emphasis on method and technique. I wanted to find a dialogical way out of political-economic problems, creating conditions for the blossoming of real and effective institutions that could constrain the worst effects of politics.

When I was facilitating discussions with people within my own profession, my colleagues in British government departments for instance, we flattened out our differences, assuming that we were all of one culture trying to understand a universal situation. We were not making distinctions between our variations of history and political positions. I closed down possibilities by assuming that a method of dissolving the power differences between us would lead us to universal meanings and clear agreements. I was attempting to bridge differences of meaning and philosophy with paper-thin assumptions of universal norms.

I used the methodical formats of the development bureaucracy and academic methodology to try to understand development. Sokolowski notes that *'this confidence in method ... lies behind the trust we have in large-scale research projects that promise to discover the truths we need to make life easier and better. The authority of the wise or intelligent person is replaced by the method-driven project sponsored by government, industry, or the academy'* (Sokolowski 2000:164). I did indeed understand something with my colleagues, but the results had a static quality. We took up positions. These positions brought me no nearer to the other people I wanted to understand *with*, those others who lived in the 'undeveloped' lifeworld, and who were so different from me. Neither did they bring me back into the world of marvellous and irritating contingency that I wanted to live in with grace and responsiveness.

Missing from the methodological approach was recognition of the 'belonging' of the question to somewhere and something. We had turned development and participation into problems; made them distant and static in our search for a method to solve them. Gadamer notes that *'the concept of the problem is clearly an abstraction, namely the detachment of the content of the question from the question that in fact first reveals it. It refers to the abstract schema to which real and really motivated questions can be reduced and under which they can be subsumed. Such a "problem" has fallen out of the motivated context of questioning, from which it receives the clarity of its sense'* (TM 376). In this way of thinking, problems are not things that we can study with the methods of the natural sciences like 'stars in the sky', but are questions and topics of speculation born of a context (TM 377).



Discipline and method certainly have a bearing on my success in the world, but I think that they arise *from* understanding rather than being conditions *for* understanding. They do not produce it, they reproduce it. Method is not achieved prior to understanding – where could it possibly come from? It does not deliver understanding, it is its result. It then provides '*the working out of possibilities projected in understanding*' (BT 188). I had put the cart before the horse. My culture glorified method as if it were superior to and prior to understanding and truth. Giving primacy to method in this way has serious limitations when it comes to human relations, political interaction, social understanding and being together with others. It reduces rather than enhances possibility when it attempts to put aside the prior conditions that bring it into existence (TM 490). As I see it now, the difference between truth and method is that truth presents itself by happening and method is a mode of presenting back to truth. When I encounter truth, I '*recognize what is, instead of starting from what ought to be or could be*' (TM 511).

## Wisdom and freedom

As a methodological discipline, science places restrictions on its own freedom to manoeuvre in order to achieve its ends, and those ends, while powerful, are not the entirety of life. The notion that science encompasses all of reality has narrowed many people's concept of understanding to one of objective knowledge. Influential western concepts of technique and expertise have displaced our respect for wisdom and connectedness even though these qualities are still required for us to have technique and expertise. The scientific idea of accuracy is not the same as the rigour of seeing what is there in the way it is presenting itself, including foregrounding and working out prejudice (TM 449-453). Hermeneutics is a rigour of allowing insight.

Of course, method is not absent from interpretation and coming to understandings, mine is only a question of how its limits and potentials are recognised in any given arena. I 'work out' fore-meanings and fore-conceptions and it makes a difference to the ease by which they are fore-grounded as questionable. I read phenomenology and it becomes more and more the way I notice and speak the world. Gadamer says, '*methodologically conscious*



*understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves'* (TM 269). But the prejudices I find to work out are not all available to be picked up precisely when I want them. I do not see them until they arise. I can be methodical in examining tradition, and can develop experience of knowing that I do not know, but I cannot be entirely methodical with understanding. It is, as Gadamer says, an event (TM 309).

*'What distinguishes the process of refining hermeneutic practice from acquiring a mere technique, whether called social technology or critical method, is that in hermeneutics history co-determines the consciousness of the person who understands. Therein lies an essential reversal: what is understood always develops a certain power of convincing that helps form new convictions. I do not at all deny that if one wants to understand, one must endeavour to distance oneself from one's opinions on the matter. Whoever wants to understand does not need to affirm what he understands. Still I think that hermeneutic experience teaches us that the effort to do so succeeds only to a limited extent. Rather, what one understands always speaks for itself as well. On this depends the whole richness of the hermeneutic universe, which includes everything intelligible. Since it brings this whole breadth into play, it forces the interpreter to play with his own prejudices at stake. These are the winnings of reflection that accrue from practice, and practice alone (TM 567).*

With the idea of practice, which is a mix of method and non-method, I move in search of collaboration and dialogue. I abandon the search for control, influence or theoretical objectivity. I explore the achievement of understandings between people in a way that attempts to account for what happens. In situations where orthodoxy is limiting my understanding, I need innovation and creativity to free me of the blindfolds I have tied around myself. Influenced by the failure of my facilitation methods to live up to the promises I had made for them, the provocations of difference given to me by African ways of being, and the distinctive understandings I was offered by scholars of European culture and history, I abandoned a search for a method that would provide a standard way of

coming to understanding with others. I became interested in the contextual, the connective and the phenomenal.

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## Chapter 6 – Coming to Understanding with Others

### *Understanding as being*

To think of understanding a problem, as I did in the two previous chapters, is to close off other possibilities for what else it might be. This is where it is helpful to turn to Heidegger and his thorough investigation of the ontology of “Being”. Understanding discloses itself as something fundamental. It is, as Heidegger puts it, ‘*an existential kind of being*’ (BT 161). Understanding is consciousness and consciousness is always consciousness of something (BT 83-89). There are then many modes of understanding, which arise from its ontologically primordial position. The business of my being conscious of existing, of realising that I am here, that I am with others rather than alone, and that I have a past and a potential future, gives rise to modes of understanding. In this chapter I intend to explore some versions of these modes of being.

Heidegger suggests that misunderstanding is a deficient form of understanding. Misunderstanding itself is not a problem to be resolved, but a historically effected point of departure which has both limitations and possibilities. This insight changes my orientation towards the question of understanding: I no longer wish to find a way of making it work, because it is already working. Instead I want to know to how it works. I recognise its eventfulness. Lack of effort and capability, exertion of power and violence over what is true, and the distorting effects of modernity and culture are all environmental effects on the event of understanding, they are not the thing itself.

In this chapter I turn to these further aspects of the phenomenon, rejecting its problematic status and developing more clarity on its nature as an ontological situation manifest in the form of being with, paying attention to and inquiring

about. I tell two stories from the period 2001-2008 and document some of the new possibilities that emerged, primarily around understanding as the connective tissue of relationships between you and I.

## ***Truth and lies – my work with pastoralists and an incident of lying***

In this story I explore how understanding arose from an encounter with another when the other claimed the status of a 'Thou' – someone both acknowledged and acknowledging, who gives advice and is heard, someone who is in relationship with me (TM 358). This marks a change from my previous encounters with others who, by contrast, held themselves and were held at a distance.

It was 2000. My husband Alastair was acting as a consultant to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs based out of Nairobi. The international donor community was spending millions in Somalia, but ten years after the war, warlords still controlled a patchwork of competing regions and towns; shootings and killings were rife, food was scarce, crime was prodigious and, while there was plenty of trading and manoeuvring, there was no government. The situation was unstable and unregulated. Nothing worked in a fashion outsiders might have called normal.

He pointed out to the UN that the majority of the rural population of Somalia and its neighbouring areas of Kenya and Ethiopia were pastoralists, whose culture played a fundamental part in the history and direction of thinking even of the urban elites, over whom their authority still persisted at least to some degree. Their culture and way of life had evolved with the ways of the drylands in which they lived. Their lives revolved around keeping, exchanging and trading livestock across large territories. These were mobile peoples, with old religions, deep knowledge of ecology and long-established traditions of clan government. Their antipathy to the centralised and, they would say predatory, nation state and their willingness to get involved in bloody violence was legendary. Yet they were also the ones who starved in their hundreds of thousands when the political wars and droughts rampaged across their lands. It might help, Alastair suggested, for the powers to come to understandings with these people if progress was going to be made with the fugitive social order, in whose reconstruction the UN, the EU, the USA, the Government of Kenya and numerous others were trying to intervene. He also pointed out that the land borders between the countries of the Horn of Africa should not be seen as boundaries impenetrable to dialogue, but the reverse; they should

be lines across which the talking was most intense and the opportunities most appreciated.

We put together an event. Its form emerged between us, his political *nous* and my theory of participation. We invited traditional leaders, business leaders, politicians and aid officials from Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia to a place in the centre of Kenya, and we chaired a meeting using pastoralist rules where they discussed their different interests in and perspectives on the situation. People said afterwards that they had reached some understandings with others who were there. It was a small shift from the *status quo* of unchecked assumptions and parallel existences. Not that Somalia showed any visible improvement as a result. But there was a slight increase in respect and engagement between the parties, especially in Kenya, and there was a spark of interest in Ethiopia.

Alastair and I spent the next six months going in and out of the UK Department for International Development in London, arguing for funding for a project that would take up the idea of developing understandings between hitherto disconnected groups. Eventually we were allotted a six month grant for a project in Ethiopia, which was later extended several times. The project would bring together pastoralist leaders, influential officials and entrepreneurs.

We made some of our early efforts in South Omo, a pastoralist territory in the south-western corner of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia. We also began working in the neighbouring regions of Oromia, Somali and Afar to the north and east. The acacia thorn trees, savannah grassland and stony valleys are populated by wheeling birds of prey, hesitant gazelles, quiet snakes and chirping insects. They make up what has been described as a non-equilibrium ecosystem (Ellis and Swift 1998). Because the rainfall is so variable, it is impossible for pastoralists to predict what quality and quantity of grass will be growing on any one bit of land from one year to the next, and how the ecology itself will change.

Pastoralists move with the variability in their environment. The grasslands go from green to brown to barren and the people move their livestock and some of their houses. They live from raising animals – cattle, camels, sheep and goats, which give them food, clothes and medicines. Animals are shared out in myriad gestures between households, cementing networks of trust, welfare, governance and justice. They are sold in great numbers to buy commodities and assets, and to pay for schooling. Where trees and water are, there are important places for rituals and deliberations by councils of elders. The leaders sit long in the shade and consider and agree on the use of land and water across vast distances. They sit in judgement of crimes and complaints and of difficulties with neighbours and governments. The young men and most capable animals move the furthest, hundreds of kilometres sometimes. The herders take their animals into one another's areas when times get hard, and they cross borders, paying scant regard to the norms of customs posts and border controls. The variability of the environment and the contours of boundaries are opportunities to

maximise their assets. There is a fluidity of movement, communication, negotiation and violence between the peoples of these arid territories. I have understood from them that their way of living is nourished by the liquid movement of animals and people in constant communication with one another and the environment.

Government officials, posted to tiny mud brick towns, preside over little networks of patronage; a few jobs to distribute, food aid from the international community, an NGO project, a school building or a veterinary campaign to hold over people for their loyalty. Higher up in government the webs of patronage extend to minor empires, which distribute flows of wealth and power. These ones are able to arm militias and put people in prison in arbitrary ways. Strange things happen; villages go up in flames, trucks are impounded, schools get built where there is neither water supply nor teachers, fancy residences are built in the administrative capitals. When they speak at meetings with their pastoralist constituencies, officials often speak for a long time, saying little that will cause any trouble from higher up. They often express in these speeches their dismissal of the backward ways of their fathers and of the people they are addressing. It takes a very long time for an outsider to understand what is going on in any depth, who is who, and why things happen as they do.

It takes an equally long time to gain any trust with the pastoralists: they know quite well how odd, unreliable, ignorant, untrustworthy and domineering outsiders can be. And anyway, besides them trusting us, there is always the problem of us trusting them. Their moralities are different from mine, for instance. Their politics and survival strategies may be more oriented towards fleecing us or laughing at us than doing any other kinds of business with us. They test us with their proverbs and their requests for small gifts. They want to know where we stand.

I had been working with my colleagues on a series of meetings to try to get pastoralists involved in holding a big new World Bank project to account. We wanted them to first understand what the multi-million dollar project was proposing to do in their areas and then to agree to be involved in a system of monitoring and adjusting it. How naïve I was. There was no way on earth that the World Bank and its counterpart, the Government of Ethiopia, would allow pastoralists anywhere near such sacred bureaucratic territory. The conversation below took place in early 2003. I was employed as a consultant to the World Bank to help design a system of monitoring and evaluation for the project. I wanted the system of accountability to be led by pastoralist men and women. We held an event in Addis Ababa to which pastoralist leaders from all over Ethiopia came and we laid out the project before them.

I then went to Turmi, in the far southwest of Ethiopia and facilitated a meeting about monitoring systems. I thought that the project had already been agreed between the Bank, the government and the people of Dassanech, Nyangatom and Hamar. By the time the conversation that follows took place, I had learned that the government had decided not to

take the project to Kuraz District, where the Dassanech and Nyangatom live, but only to Hamar. The alternative offering of the government to these two peoples was by no means as financially important or as long term as the World Bank project. Our team went to tell them the bad news and then Lotikori of the Dassanech and Lopiding of the Nyangatom asked us to come with them to the administrative capital at Jinka, to find out the truth of it.

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*Lotikori's face was hard and dark. He was addressing Awoke, the Government Administrator. The mosquitoes were playing around our ears. We were sitting in a dimly lit room in a small hotel in Jinka. I was picking at the plastic tablecloth – hoping to be a mediator.*

**Lotikori:** 'My fellow elders and I came to Addis Ababa from Kuraz and we came to Turmi to your meetings and after that we went back home and talked to our people. You told me and Lopiding that this World Bank Pastoral Development Project would start. We would decide our own activities in the project. At Addis and Turmi we only talked about this one project and this is the one we knew about. Now it has been replaced by another one, belonging to the Federal Government. Where has this new one come from and how is it going to be done? I don't know. Our discussions were about one thing only – we only know about one project and it is the project we discussed at Addis and Turmi. It was to come to Nyangatom, Dassanech and Hamar. The people have been involved in discussing this project, in agreeing with this project. It was going to bring together Nyangatom, Hamar and Dassanech. At the moment there is a lot of conflict between us, because of hunger. People from all levels of the government and the people all met together at Addis and Turmi and we decided for this project to come. What has happened? I was very surprised because we had all sat together. At the start Lopiding, from Nyangatom, Aiyke from Hamar and I all asked each other, "Can this be true?" In the end we decided it was true and we went and told our people. You said there is another project, but we are not hearing it.'

**Awoke:** 'You say that you have no information about the Federal project, but many of our experts have been down to Kuraz and have been discussing the project. If you look around you will see things have already begun, for example the water pipes at K... Even federal level experts have come down to Bubua, Toltalle and Omorate and you have seen them and talked to them and how can you say you don't know about this federal project? Around Omorate, the federal government has brought an irrigation project, but due to the killing of the government officer, the project stopped. Who has created this problem? The government has been doing every activity for the people, we are trying to treat all people the same way, so when we saw that Kuraz has two projects, [the World Bank project and the Federal Government project], we had to take one away.'

*Awoke looked tired. He too seemed to be suffering, but he remained composed. It was his livelihood as a government officer against theirs as pastoralist leaders. He was also a Hamar, one of the groups that were to get the World Bank project. He had complicated loyalties.*

**Lopiding:** 'I have heard. Did we join in with these experts you talk of? Who did the research and the studies? The ones who came have not met with me. The only people who we know, who brought us together in meetings to discuss, are these people.'

*He waved across at us three sitting to the side. We were trying not to feel betrayed or betrayers.*

'We made decisions at Turmi about the project. I don't understand. If this project was not for us, then why were we ever called to these meetings at Addis and Turmi? After all these discussions I was just waiting for it to start. The things that I know are the things that I see. I've *seen* things happening with the World Bank project. In Turmi we drank coffee and ate with the Hamar and it made me happy.

'You were at Turmi. Why didn't you explain to us then? It would have been much better if we hadn't been invited, if the meeting at Turmi had never happened, if we had not told our people. I'm not an educated person, but if someone makes me a promise, then I expect it to happen. We have problems of hunger and not enough rain, and I was expecting with this project we would be able to sort out some of our problems.'

**Awoke:** 'There is nothing I can do. The government has decided.'

**Lotikori:** 'Now we have heard everything that has been said. Yet we said over and over again at the start that if what you are saying is not what you are going to do, please don't tell us you will do it. If this decision was known, why were we not told? You said it was certain.

'You said it was certain.

'You said it was certain.

'So we told our people.

'How can we trust you now? When are you going to start telling the truth?

'Is it a priority to help hungry people and to keep the country peaceful?

'In our area there are no health services, no education, nothing. You said we would be able to help our children get health.

'Now we see nothing.'

**Awoke:** 'The people who decide these things are at the regional and federal level.'



*[His shoulders slumped, he was defeated. We were all defeated – for the moment.]*

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I felt my responsibility for being one of the naïve representatives of a dirty little process of divide and rule, of bureaucratic ineptitude, or whatever combination it was. The elders seemed to see it as important. As far as I was concerned, their level of emotion, and their willingness to be in town that night when they could have been at home in the smoky warmth of their homesteads, attested to that. I had been asking for many years why it is that officials, aid workers and community leaders find it so hard to come to true understandings with one another. The elders' questions of that night, while addressed primarily to Awoke, the government representative, were also addressed to me.

Although it may seem normal to be promised something by government and then for that promise not to materialise, for the community leaders who were speaking it was yet another betrayal. Lopiding and Lotikori, old leaders respected in their communities, had made promises to their people on the basis of the promise given to them. They were saying that they would be accused of having taken a bribe to look the other way when the decision for investment of a large amount of money into their areas was changed in favour of another, neighbouring community, with which their own were in active conflict. During the conversation I had a strong feeling that I needed to understand why I had ended up playing a part in so uncomfortable a situation. I was feeling guilty – for it had been me who had facilitated the meetings at Addis and Turmi at which these promises had been made. I had made it look like I was guaranteeing the promises, and in a way, I was.

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So we facilitate lies. Three months before this conversation, we were together at Turmi, and one of these old leaders had fixed his eyes to mine and spoken to me of truth and lies, at length. It was the end of the three-day meeting that I was facilitating, under a beautiful shade tree next to the river bed, with 30 elders of three tribes and district and zonal officials, to begin to design together how this World Bank project would work and be held to account. What account? At the end – Aiyke, with his fellow elders behind him sitting on their wooden stools in a half moon, stood and spoke to me about truth and lies and all was quiet. He explained that lies are not just deliberate deceits or cruelties, they are also failures to recognise and admit what is obvious, they are times of too much optimism, when we make promises we can't keep. We do this because we care more for ourselves than for others. He explained that truth is simply being plain about who we are, what we know and what we can and cannot do or be sure of. I sat gazing up at him; I could feel the awkward stretch of my neck. I needed to keep on looking into those very old eyes. Behind me were my people, the foreigners. To one side were the government workers, some of whom were children of those tribes, now suspended half way between the

bureaucracy and their ancient culture. Behind him were the elders, who repeated the last words of each of his sentences in a rhythmical rumble. The tree arched over and the sun was setting. When he had finished I said, 'Yes, I hear you. I will keep my promises.' His word had gone right into my heart and lodged there. The elders blessed us. They blessed their land, their animals and their children. They called for rain and peace.

And here I was three months later coming back to tell them that their forebodings were right. It had indeed been a lie. I thought my work was about facilitating truth and I found I was facilitating lies. For the first time I think I realised that I was lying too, just by taking part and being hopeful. I at last saw that truth was not a statement of objective reality, but an ability to speak clearly on what is and what is not present. I saw lies in a new way too, a tendency to project a spurious certainty into an unknowable future. I suddenly wanted to find a way not to lie, I wanted to question and find clarity. I guess it occurred to me then that there were only so many times when someone would look you in the eye and tell you something really useful. And there were only so many times when you had a chance to put things right. It underlined that my whole working life had been about these kinds of false promises and I was still getting it wrong. I had not expected to continue to get it wrong even after 20 years. I decided that if I didn't act now I would never get it right and all my great ambitions would be just empty dreams. So it was serious that I wised up.

## Letting something be said to me

As I noted in chapter 4, Heidegger gives prominence to the ontological significance of 'care', which arises out of the fundamental state of existence that is Being-with. As forms of care, Heidegger draws a distinction between the 'concern' I have for things, and the 'solicitude' I have for others (BT 157). Because I know that others are as much conscious of being with me as I am with them, I do not know them as things that are available to me (or 'ready-to-hand' in Heidegger's parlance), but as other beings that I care about. He points out that solicitude has many modes: *'being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not "mattering" to one another – these are possible ways of solicitude. And it is precisely these last-named deficient and indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average being-with-one-another'* (BT 158). My presence at those meetings in Addis Ababa and Turmi with the South Omo elders was an outcome of my solicitude. The elders mattered to me because I was trying to work on a way for our worlds to live better together. But then again, they did not matter to me, because the demands of my industry, the World Bank and the Government of Ethiopia mattered to me more (I

felt overcome by their powers to decide things). And then again, when they spoke simply and wisely, the elders mattered to me tremendously and solicitude slipped into a fully active mode. It was solicitude between the elders and me, each for the other and each for ourselves.

*'The 'Thou',' says Gadamer, 'is not something about which one speaks, but is that to which one speaks' (TM 536). He outlines three kinds of experience of the 'Thou,' starting with its most deficient, where the person tries to 'discover typical behaviour in his fellow men' and thus comes to know and predict 'human nature' (TM 358, Warnke 2002:90-93). This way of being with others is arguably the way I was in previous stories. I often objectified other people for being the objects of my industry's efforts – not people, but materials to be made into something. Then, in this story, one of them made himself very clear to me. He was perhaps forgetting himself and the history of our hopeless interrelations, or perhaps he saw that I might actually learn to cross the chasm between us.*

The second kind experience of the Thou is an appropriating one. I acknowledge the Thou as a person who has relevance to me, but whom I already think I understand. I claim to know him or her better than he or she knows him or herself. In this and previous stories I demonstrate repeatedly that a habit of thinking that I already know the person, having categorized him or her as poor or different, as an official or a traditional leader, as a woman or a man, is a habitual mode which functions to *'keep the other person's claim at a distance'* (TM 360). When I was in this mode, I reflected myself out of the relationship with the other and I destroyed any moral bond that we could ever have had, whatever I might have been imagining about my moral purposes. In neither the first nor the second mode did I or they understand anything new from one another.

Of the third kind of experience, Gadamer says:

*'in human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine*

*human bond. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person “understands” the other. Similarly, “to hear and obey someone” does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person slavish. Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so’* (TM 361).

To give the Thou full recognition would then involve appropriation of what is alien about them into my own horizon while maintaining recognition of their distinctness (TM 252). Under that tree, I did just that. A wise and tricky old man gave me some advice, and I heard it. It is, for me, one of Gadamer’s crucial and most simple insights, that for understanding to be at its least deficient, I must be prepared for the other to tell me something (TM xxxv).

## **Advice**

It occurred to me that in all the time up to then there had not been much in the way of good advice that I had noticed. Apposite advice turns out to be an important element in understanding, not just for its content, but for how it illuminates the reliance of understanding on the ‘I-Thou’ relationship. Whether it arises from the communication of a conscious being or the simple but absolute disclosure of a thing that is ready-to-hand, understanding depends on relationship. The quality and nature of what is understood depends on the quality and nature of the relationship and its potential for opening me to disclosure.

If advice comes from a quarter that, for whatever reason, I deem worthy of respect, it offers me precious openings towards understanding what is being said to me. The broader is my sense of respect, the wider will be the scope of advice that I can hear. In some cultures, this extends to respect for the non-human world, which then gives all sorts of good advice (Abram 1996; Cheney and Weston 1999). Advice poses a question that I can hear and I make a genuine attempt to answer truthfully. If I do not behave in such a way as to attract it, no advice comes my way. It arises from circumstances in which both the advisor and the advised are attending to each other as a Thou. At Turmi it happened to be my opinion that

this old man and all his fellows had full authority to address me as they did at that moment. As I saw it, they were venerable sages, trained for many years in the arts of clarity, effective argument and leadership. They came from a tradition that emphasized dialogue and clarity. I stopped wandering about in a fog of wishes and arrogant generalizations and, for a moment, engaged in a real exchange that had the intent of creating understanding. My respect for those people increased and the likelihood that I would be able to hear them again likewise increased.

I was used to pastoralist leaders sighing and turning away when they heard unthinking promises. That this time they were willing to be so forceful marked a change in my (our group's) relations with people who had been so distant from us. We came a little closer together. I think that the elders recognised our efforts to work on a way to hear what people were really saying as a move of respect. It made it possible for the elders to address us and potentially fruitful for them to do so. There was a mutual step forward into an engagement. This was not, I hasten to add, an engagement of perfect friendship and trust. It was one of being willing to be a little firm and straight with one another. Whether we used this new kind of engagement to be helpful to one another, to let each other down or to engage in a fight remained an open question. How each of us used the new directness would determine whether and how it continued. Whatever came next, however, it was for the moment a respectful engagement.

## **Expectation**

Just as the hermeneutic circle requires the parts and whole to add up and is provoked by contradiction, so is understanding provoked by thwarted expectation. It is when expectation is challenged, notes Gadamer, that I truly experience something (TM 353). Experience is the surprise of something different than before, something more fitting. Having an experience at its most phenomenal is when a person is open to what is disclosed and how it is fitting into her own horizon. People say, 'in my experience...' and mean 'as I have come to understand it...', and if a person is truly experienced, they are most likely to know not only what they have come to understand, but also that they do not know what is coming.

I did not *expect* to be held responsible for the promises of the World Bank staff, with whom I felt connected but not a part, but when I thought about it, I could recognize my responsibility. I did not expect that the pastoralists would address me so directly. I thought of myself as a neutral intermediary. But at that hour under that tree, I heard what the old man was saying to me. Just before he had said it, as the sun was slanting through the lowest boughs, someone had pointed out to me that pastoralists do not continue with their deliberations when the sun has gone down. Sunset, said my advisor, is a tangible moment when we must take things seriously and conclude. It made sense to me. The elders and I gathered the meeting to its close. We sat more closely in a tight circle and concentrated. The elders became a potent group and spoke their last words of the day, of the whole event, through the old man. This appreciation of the import of the moment of closing, which was something of their own experience being brought forward by all of them together, gave the moment and its words a particular force. I was addressed pointedly and I listened seriously to what they were saying. They spoke with an intensity of emotion and clarity that expressed their expectation that what they were saying would be understood and their advice would be taken.

I did not think twice about agreeing. I brought the notion of the easy promise from my years of experience with aid. I would make plans that were paper simplifications of reality and disingenuously claim that they were practical and good. I pretended that they would achieve ideals what we all should have known were impossible.

The whole experience encompassed the scene three months later, when we sat around a table at the little hotel with its mosquitoes and sadness. I was not going to be able to ignore the consequences. I sat there with the angry elders and the wilted administrator, listening to that bitter conversation and felt guilty and powerless. The expectation that empty promises did not matter suddenly look very doubtful. However much I blamed the structures of aid and patronage for the betrayal, I could see my own part. I could make the distinction now between what was mine to promise and what was not. The fruitlessness of broken

promises and questionable plans became clear then and a much fuller meaning of what Aiyke had been saying three months before came home to me.

These elders suggested to me in their conduct that truth is a comportment of being towards other beings, of each person towards each other person, rather than objectively acquired universal fact. I am not suggesting that all optimisms are untruths, but rather that in those circumstances optimisms were indeed lies. Hope is not often a lie, but it can become one in certain conditions, such as when a person like me turns from hope to optimism, from optimism to empty promises and from empty promises to broken ones. The important thing here is that taking up a stance towards *being clear together* was more important even than the million dollar World Bank project and all its possibilities. This was the advice that they were giving.

## Experience

Georg Simmel said that experience is an adventure. We venture out. It is exciting and uncertain and we return to the everyday enriched and more mature (TM 69). Experience, Gadamer says, is a negatively productive process. When we really experience something in the true sense of the word, we refute previously held false generalizations and we acquire knowledge that is valid, and often repeated, until we have a new experience (TM 353). When we experience, the false generalization of the “typical” comes into the foreground to be refuted, whereas up to that point it has been invisible. The new experience has now become a new horizon for the one who experiences, who now ‘*recognizes*’ herself in what is ‘*alien and different*’ (TM 355). In my case, I had not appreciated the potential import of a false promise up to that point. To me it was just another day in the regular round of promises that made up the world of aid and government. My lack of appreciation was helped, of course, by the fact that this particular aid and government was neither aiding nor governing me. False promises seemed like nothing because in my previous experience I had never seen the intensity and scope of the insult and danger that they brought with them. But on the matter of insult I had plenty of opinions, so when I saw insult I was able to understand afresh.

Now that I had a new experience of how much the promises of my industry mattered to these people, I might be able to predict their reactions to future events to which they were called by aid agency and government officials. I would read the expressions on their faces and their careful words in a new way. And I would also rewrite my own history, remembering all those instances in which hope, hardness and resignation were written on faces that I had faced. I wanted then to avoid making false promises or imagining that I could be more knowing or more powerful than the processes by which human historicity played itself out. The way the World Bank, the Government of Ethiopia or any other institution emitted decisions meant that there was a game to be played which required clarity, not credulity. It would be better for understanding, I realized, to try to make only the kind of promises that were an accurate expression of my own understanding and nothing more. What kind of promises would they be? They would involve no lies, no generalizations and no appropriations of the future behaviour of others. Where someone else's assertion or interpretation was involved, what I hoped I would remember to say was *'I heard him or her say this or that'*, rather than *'I believe this or that to be the case.'*

Experience lays the foundations for its own renewal, as we notice how it constantly arises and overturns what we thought we knew and the plans we had made. Experience, says Gadamer, drawing on Aeschylus, gives a fundamental insight into the finitude of being human. We really do realise that we are *'master neither of time nor the future.'* We accept that *'all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain'* and *'dogmatism reaches an absolute barrier'* (TM 357). Contrary to the expectations of my culture, that everything could be planned and understood in advance of its happening, experience tells me differently. The truly experienced person, says Gadamer, is someone who is *'radically undogmatic, who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself'* (TM 355).



## Understanding together

Just as with any other thing that is understood, my appreciation of understanding evolved as the prejudices I held about it were brought into the foreground in the course of experience. From an expectation that I would gain understanding only by inquiring from an objective distance, I experienced directly that understandings arise in eye-to-eye interaction with the Thou and the Other. In the listening and speaking with the Thou, what I understood was not the other person, an elusive goal that I had long thought was a necessary end of understanding, but something true that they were saying to me. Or as Gadamer puts it, *'what is so understood is not the Thou but the truth of what the Thou says to us. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it. It is the same with historical tradition. It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves'* (TM xxxv).

In this story of truth and lies, I found the central importance of the Thou to understanding, and I also noted how experience emerges in communication with the Thou. When I acknowledge another person and am acknowledged, I appreciate something new and as such I gain experience which I could not have gained alone. The finitude of historicity and its different expression in each of us shows its productive nature. I glimpse an insight into our basic state of Being together, which is, as Heidegger puts it, *'already essentially manifest in a co-state-of-mind and a co-understanding'* (BT 205).

## ***The Beast of Bureaucracy – a risky and collaborative enterprise***

In another version of my coming to understanding with others, which developed at the same time as I began to see what Thou can mean, I now tell a story from another part of the world of development in which collaboration makes for understanding from unexpected places. In 2002 and 2003 I was working with a

colleague from the Institute of Development Studies to try to understand and be helpful to colleagues in a large bilateral government aid agency in Sweden.

In the same year as I was making promises in Ethiopia, I was also involved in an inquiry with a group of eight people in the Swedish International Development Agency, Sida, in Stockholm. It was called *Lagom*. We were investigating together what it meant to foster an ideal of participation in the work of the agency. At the end we wrote a small book about it, calling the office Valhalla and the city Nordstad.

It started at a short training course we held at IDS for staff of Sida, on the subject of people's participation in development. At the end Katja Jassey of Sida, Andrea Cornwall of IDS and I gave an open invitation to anyone who wished to join us in forming a co-operative inquiry group to look at participation and Sida. Eight people from different parts of the organisation signed up. They expected that Andrea and I knew what we were doing, because we had researched participation in development. We believed that the approach should not be the same as previous approaches, because it should arise with its circumstances and the unique questions it sought to answer. We had very little experience of inquiry groups, except for the one we were running inside our own team at IDS.

Andrea at IDS and Katja at Sida were the ringleaders, with Seema Aurora Johnson from Uppsala University and I giving insights and helping with recording and facilitating. We met once every couple of months for a day and explored ideas about what participation was and about what Sida was and how and where the two fitted together. Hermod one day accused Andrea, Katja and I of using them as guinea pigs in an experiment. I protested, I said we were all being guinea pigs together, but I worried that he was right. We wanted to understand participation and aid bureaucracies and we might well have been using them to do it. Except that we believed that they wanted to understand it too.

They named the group *Lagom*, which in Swedish means 'not too much, not too little, just right'. Or at least Vidar named it, in the pub after our first session in Stockholm and the name stuck. That was how things generally happened in that group, someone had an idea and everyone followed it. It wasn't always the same person. It was a delightful group of people. We laughed a lot, and questioned each other. Each one was serious yet in some way light, worried yet in some way relaxed. As Hildr put it, the group was made up of 'firesouls' which is a direct translation from Swedish and speaks for itself. I think too, when I look back and ask myself what the group of otherwise quite different characters created, I see people speaking so fluidly with one another and I remember that there was an openness that I hadn't come across in our work before. Free questioning, I realised, was normal neither my world nor theirs. In more formal settings our public questions would always be careful ones. We could not afford not to have a ready-made answer already available. Our private questions were a confusion of intimations that things were not entirely adding up.

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Helped by a curator, we put together an installation in the basement of the block Sida occupied in downtown Stockholm. We opened the doors to the organisation's juniors and seniors. Katja, Seema, Andrea and I wrote this:

*'The group was woven together with a disparate collection of wants and worries: of spending too much time talking, of spending too little time thinking, of having a structure, of not having any structure, of being forced to swim, of simply treading water and of drowning in the depths. It became clear that it was going to be impossible to please everybody. Hermod put his finger on it, wryly observing that all the doers will think they have no time, and the thinkers will make it more complicated... And so it was.'*

*'The elevator vestibules of Valhalla were covered by posters with photos of well-known Valhalla characters from the 1970s entitled 'in the head of a Valhalla-ite'. These unconventional invitations were to entice as many staff as possible to come to the basement late on a Thursday afternoon. The posters made a promise of drinks, but the rest was left up to the imagination of the reader. And people came. One after another, they found their way down to the big Valhalla exercise room way below the streets of busy central Nordstad. Within a very short time, over a hundred people – managers, support staff and desk officers from all age groups – had gathered to find out what on earth these posters were all about.'*

*'They found a sparsely lit room. The huge mirror covering one of the walls was decorated with Christmas lights. On it were charts of how much Valhalla had spent on development since its inception in the 1960s, how many people Valhalla had employed in the field throughout this time and what had been said about participation. A Lagomite asked people to write their own memories of significant events at any point in time on post-its and add them to the wall. In another corner, a video was running with images of people at Valhalla stating the words that they associated with participation – 'grassroots', 'something good', 'democracy', 'an impossible mission'. On a washing line, photos of a Valhalla officer taken every day at the same time were hung next to the billboards from that day of the biggest Nordinian daily newspaper. The officer was usually next to his computer, while the billboards shouted out the daily angst of the world. A fridge in the corner was covered with 'fridge poetry', using the vocabulary of bureaucratic life: one of our team encouraged the visitors to create 'Valhalla poetry'.'*

*'Valhalla and Nordia are characterised by utredningar ('inquiries') and seriousness when it comes to presenting results and problems. Yet those supposedly serious bureaucrats participated wholeheartedly in the creation of poetry and a common history with a glass of wine in one hand (paid for by the foreigners in the group as the Nordinian State does not allow such expenses) and a pink post-it in the other. Valhalla is a place known for its problem-solving, not for its fun or questioning. It is inhabited by people on a passionate quest for a just world.'*

*'As we sat analysing what people had said and how they had reacted, sharing stories of how a senior official had arrived – furious at the apparent flippancy, only*

*to become totally engaged in telling her own story of change in Valhalla – and as we exchanged snatches of conversation we'd overheard, we felt a strange mixture of thrill at our own brilliance and daring and fear that we really had gone too far and been too obscure. Had we lost those we'd tried to reach in the process? We had held an Event, a Happening, with the kind of lighting and lingering questions you might find in the Modern Museum of Art, but was it the right thing for Lagom to do and was it the right thing to do at Valhalla?*

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*'A year later, at the close of our work together, we decided we needed to make some kind of report, so we had a meeting to decide what it should contain. The document that emerged looked and read like any other document that Valhalla might produce. It was clearly written, comprehensive, and informative. It couldn't be faulted for what it said. But it wasn't Lagom. And some of those from Valhalla strongly felt that it didn't represent the real spirit of Lagom. We'd wanted to express ourselves, but we'd become a secret that couldn't be told to the outside world. Something of our intentions needed to be communicated beyond the group, but how to do so was difficult to imagine, and we became anxious once more. Then Freja had an idea, recruited others to help and produced a document that was unlike anything that had ever before been written by or for Valhalla.*

*'Freja realised that if Lagom were to produce a written document, it had to have that extraordinary factor that worked like speech worked on people. This kind of document would make a difference precisely because, unlike the documents that ended their lives within those immaculate cloth-bound official covers lining Valhalla's shelves, this one would be read and talked about. It would be different. It would make an impact; it would be daring, funny, brilliant. It would be Lagom. The new document, 'Voices of the Bureaucrats – Crying out for Help' featured a diary of a desk officer, inundated with emails and meetings and grappling in the midst of it all to have any space to think or do anything differently. It captured the urgency of action, the sense of purpose and the frustration – anger, even – that many of the group members felt in relation to the grindingly mundane bureaucratic process. It did so in prose packed with verve and allusion. It was a totally different document and those who liked it loved it; others hated it. It was a dangerously different piece of writing, something that implied taking a real risk: stunning if it came off, perhaps worse than embarrassing if it didn't.*

*'This evocative account of donors' everyday lives – the perks, as well as the hardships – was, some felt, too close to the bone. It would upset people. It would annoy people. It would put people off. For some of the group, the 'Voices of the Bureaucrats' document was delicious because it was so different; for others, it compounded the kind of risks the group had taken with the Event. As agreement on the final version began to coalesce, Lofn took a position of steely nerve and spoke out to stop its publication.*

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*'What makes the "passionate bureaucrat" tick is a sense of connectedness with action, with seeing things done. This was the impatience manifest in Vidar's*

*restless energy, in Hildir's indignation, in Lofn's careful strategy, in Heimdall's quiet passion, in Hermod's desire for things to be done properly and in Freja's fiery frustration with business as usual. At first those who lived their daily working lives in Valhalla didn't admit that they needed time to think, time to play even. This didn't fit with the image of what a responsible – let alone a passionate – bureaucrat is supposed to do with their time. But being Lagom and tangling with the Beast of Bureaucracy created the space to think and to play; and how good it felt to have, in the midst of the routines of a daily life full of emails, meetings and documents, that time to stand back, to laugh, to muse, to give voice to feelings and half formed ideas, to learn. Words like fun, pleasure, laughter are not generally part of the vocabulary of writings on institutionalizing participation. It is almost as if no-one would dare suggest that so serious a matter as participation could actually be tackled through people's everyday lives because it is important and enjoyable, not simply because it is a duty. The image of the faceless bureaucrat of the public sector organisation is at odds with the diverse personalities and passions of the people who work within them.*

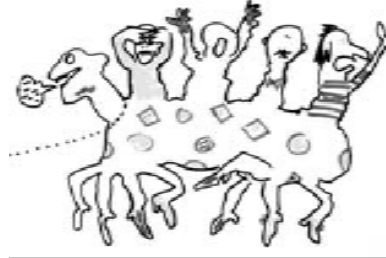
*'For all our hopes and aspirations, Lagom was never able to really be red [formal] enough to succeed in its struggle with the Beast of Bureaucracy and achieve what many of us had hoped for: to bring about significant changes in the organisation. But that was Lagom's strength as well. Lagom allowed the space to be uncertain, questioning, indecisive, undecided, and the time to mull over an argument or to reflect on a question that had been needling. As Vidar explained, "I spend all my working life trying to be so damn effective. It's such a relief not having to do that, I can even be creative." Lagom became a place in which a group of very different people from different corners of the organisation could find kindred spirits and bring meaning to their work. They could strengthen their resolve to persist with small acts that might, over time, make a difference – and find a space for taking pleasure in everyday working lives that can all too often be such a source of stress and frustration. The Beast of Bureaucracy remains untamed, but the spirit of Lagom remains undimmed – and for those who were part of it, bureaucratic 'business as usual' will never be quite the same again (Cornwall, Jassey et al. 2007).*

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We were embarrassed and intrigued. We were experimental, not in a scientific sense, that's why we were so worried, but in a creative-artistic sense in a place where art just wasn't. There was rebellion, no longer putting up with being an ordinary hardworking part of a structure of vagueness. There was bravery. There was edgy moral knowledge. We were pushing at an invisible boundary and seeing what would happen. We did it together because we could not have done it alone. Our questions about how an organisation could do good and how we could do good within it were in effect versions of a single question we all raised at once. Why do our bureaucracies stifle us and what we do to shine nonetheless? They started as 'what can we do?' questions, but they turned into a magnificent exploration of 'what is happening?' that we could only do because we did it

together. It gave us a quite unexpectedly strong sense of experience and co-operation, feeling it and doing it together, rather than dreaming about it.

The beast of  
bureaucracy



## Risk

We did not come to understand of participation as a disembodied practice offered to others; we understood that what we were really exploring together was ourselves and the place we were in, (which, if you think about it, is true participation). We felt and gained clarity on the frustrations, achievements and hopes of being actors in development institutions. As we untangled the bureaucracy in which we were embedded in our various ways, we unpicked, with the help of insights that each of us gave from our different perspectives, the formal and informal possibilities of our positions, a kind of second-person action research (Reason and Torbert 2001; Coghlan and Brannick 2005:110).

When we began to plan the final document and could not agree on what to write, we realized how helpful we had found the privacy and trust of our meetings. They had allowed us to be free and distinctive questioners in a world in which questions had lost their character of openness and surprise. Our questions started as uniform affirmations of a way of doing things deemed correct by general consensus, and they lacked innovation and possibility. But inside the safety of our days together we achieved a degree of liberation from the confinement of leading questions (such as, 'how do I do participation?') and began to ask other questions out loud like, 'what on earth am I doing every day?' Speaking them aloud gave to each of us the opportunity to hone the real questions that each wanted to pose about what we were all doing. Although it was not at all easy to see our way, we did begin to untangle the hitherto hidden confusions of our positions and unresolved experiences. It is not surprising that at the end we could not write a



report about our collaboration. We had stipulated a formal inquiry into participation and had achieved an inquiry into being 'passionate bureaucrats', as Andrea put it.

Andrea and I had imagined that people needed 'a safe haven' because of fear of embarrassment and loss of respect if they were to put their apparently foolish questions at risk in open debate. We saw protection as a necessary response to the power of authority to inhibit the imagination. In practice, we found the concept of risk was more complex. We found, for example, that *Lagom* was an arena of potential built not only on safety but on collaboration. Consideration for one another in a situation of risk made it possible to find and pursue the questions that occupied the open edges of each of our horizons. Anxious as we were, I believe we felt the kind of authenticity that Heidegger speaks of as '*freedom to be*' (BT 232), meaning, I suggest, that we accepted ourselves as real, risk-taking and extraordinary and in so doing we lived a little more intensely.

I felt that we were communally responsible for the risks we were taking. As we put ourselves repeatedly at risk by asking questions to one another and to Sida that we had not previously dared to pose for fear of seeming disloyal or illogical, I, for one, came to understand risk as essential to understanding. As I noted above, Gadamer observes that it is when we put our prejudices at risk that they are brought properly into play and made positive. Bravery, in the form of deliberate self-exposure to something risky, makes accessible at last that which was merely potential. It seems it is fundamental to our projecting ourselves into new horizons. We were confined by a measure of carefulness and we were also liberated by a degree of recklessness.

Heidegger suggests to me that ontologically, a feeling of risk is a mode of anxiety that arises from 'Being-in-the-world'. My anxieties about threats that may lie in wait are a projection into future potential, grounded in my consciousness of being-with. They also draw on my experience of trouble and my historically-effected understanding of what is bad for me; but this is over and above the general state of anxiety that comes from just existing. This understanding of being generates a mood of anxiety about nothing in particular (BT 230-9). Care is not,

Heidegger points out, concerns and solicitudes about the Self, rather it is more generalized care about the whole. Care is a way of characterizing understanding, and taking risks is elemental to its projecting itself into the world. At the same time from the basis of care comes my tendency to become immersed in what is normal, familiar, acceptable, and safe. Thus do I, says Heidegger, restrict my options and reduce my possibilities (BT 239). Collaboration expands potential once again by drawing me back toward the risks that open me to new possibilities.

## Comedy

*Lagom* sometimes had the quality of a play – we transformed the scenery, conducted fugues of conversation and played King Lear and his fool. Gadamer observes:

*‘The transformation [of a play] is transformation into the true. It is not enchantment in the sense of a bewitchment that waits for the redeeming word that will transform things back to what they were; rather, it is itself redemption and transformation back into true being. In being present in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn. Someone who can perceive the comedy and tragedy of life can resist the temptation to think in terms of purposes, which conceals the game that is played with us’ (TM 112).*

So did we touch on and accept the absurdity of the very concept of a public sector organization providing aid for millions of people in what it called ‘developing countries’ and then inviting those people to participate and us to organize it all. We enumerated the failures of aid and looked for ways out. Gadamer, when he is talking about the participation of the spectator in a tragedy, suggests that something essential speaks to us out of the sadness, impossibility, intractability and black humour and we recognize it as truth. It is a communion.

*‘The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present. The real emphasis of the*



*tragic phenomenon lies ultimately on what is presented and recognized, and to participate in it is not a matter of choice* (TM 132).

We found aid's redeeming moments. We understood the historic finitude of Sida and its potential for a great variety of expression and engagement. *Lagom* broke us out of our everydayness for a short while each time we met, discomfiting us with its absurd challenges, and keeping us endlessly amused with anecdotes and mischief. We pilloried our own efforts to do good and searched for other ways of doing things, and then collapsed into laughter and affection. It liberated, I think, what Gadamer calls '*the free sweep of invention and the originality that creates new models...*' (TM 53). It also clarified another side to understanding, which is that which arises when we are together with friends.

## ***Coming to understandings***

At the beginning of this chapter I noted that seeing understanding as a problem was not enough to encompass all that it is. In the exploration of the two stories above, I have considered some of understanding's real-life happenings in engagements between people, and I have touched on the fundamental essence of understanding and even misunderstanding as being and being-in-conversation-with-others. I have left behind the notion of the problem and made understanding more concrete and alive.

Misunderstanding, rather than being a problem, or a mistake, turns out on closer inspection to be just a version of understanding with others. For Gadamer, the difference between understanding and misunderstanding is more a matter of the degree to which our prejudices find '*full play*' in any particular circumstance, because it is this degree of play that makes prejudice '*able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself*' (TM xxx). The 'mis' in misunderstanding is its lack of play; it misses opportunities to project into possibilities.

As I noted above, the I-Thou relationship has different modes, each producing a different understanding. In the open modes, conversations are not dominated by

one party, but are characterised by being interested in what the other has to say. *'Listening to one another and addressing one another are essential aspects of a conversation. These provide an openness that simultaneously renders a conversation both unpredictable and fruitful'* (Figal 2002:106-108). The thread that binds the participants together is the thing that is being talked about, and the participants allow the thing free play to disclose itself. They offer contradiction, interruption and disagreement as well as confirmation (Marshall 2004). It is *'the coming into language'* of meanings (TM 474). When they are open to it, the participants do not hinder the conversation, but let it happen. Sometimes it is surprise, shock or thwarted expectation that generates this mode of being, sometimes it is respect and trust that opens us to advice and sometimes it is the shared experience of risk and absurdity.

If I accept Gadamer's argument that understanding arises as language, handed to me by tradition and all those who have made it by speaking it, then there is no understanding that is not a conversation of some sort. Even if the Thou is speaking to me from my own memory, or from a historical text, a work of art, or a brick – it is still an I-Thou relationship because it is framed in language. The I-Thou relationship is at the centre of all events of understanding. With this new insight I move on to examine the suggestion that understanding is the conversation with others that makes up our lives.

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## Chapter 7 – The Art of Dialogue

In the previous chapter I focused on various aspects of understanding that arise in the coming together of I and Thou. I learned that understanding grows in the relationship between people, and between people and the things they talk about. I realised that understanding was not a problem of method or willpower, but a state of being which is being with others. It arises when I let something be said to me and I allow that the other always has something to say to me. The distance that I had imagined between me and the things and people of the world proved to be illusory and it began to dissipate. I could still distinguish I from thou, and this from that, but now I did so with challenges and ideas from others. I could see how different perspectives could inhabit the same world.

In this chapter, I turn to more aspects of collaborative understanding, this time expanding the field of inquiry to look at how understandings arise not only in a relationship between you and me, but in the life of conversation itself. First I tell a story of four meetings, and focus on how I learned to listen in the conversation. Then I turn to an interview with three pastoralist elders, two men and a woman, about their views on coming to understanding with others within and beyond their tradition. In the chapter that follows and completes this investigation, one of these elders, who was also one of the organisers of the entire series of pastoralist meetings in Ethiopia that spanned five years, talks to me about what they meant to him. We focus together on the life of a great conversation.

### ***Listening to pastoralists***

From 2001, I was part of the Pastoralist Communication Initiative, a project and a group of people working on understanding and dialogue in East Africa. We took part in, and supported, a series of discussions that radiated across multiple people and across distances of time and space. This story describes how I listened in on a

series of meetings in southern Ethiopia; the first in 2004 and the last in 2009. Each one demonstrates different qualities of understanding.

I was sitting on a school bench feeling hot and bored. It was January 2004, a meeting organised by officials of the government of Ethiopia as part of the annual national 'Pastoralist Day'. I was writing in my notebook, sitting in an airless hall that looked out onto a run-down old agricultural project yard in Yaballo. We were ranged in rows facing the officials who sat behind a table at the front. Pastoralist leaders from all parts of Ethiopia were standing up in turn, grasping their ceremonial sticks in their knobbly hands and addressing the seated members of the ruling party, bureaucrats, resource-rich agents (such as I) and fellow members of pastoralist communities.

I wrote: *Borana elder: his speech is just a shopping list, a bunch of requests to the government officials – conflict, education, stopping agricultural expansion, health, roads...* My writing trailed off into a picture of an old man with a long ceremonial stick. I thought: *'they put themselves in a subservient position by always asking for things. They are vulnerable to refusal and dependency. This isn't working. I hate listening to this.'*

Fifteen minutes later, I wrote: *Hararghe elder – "we have spoken about the conflict in our area many times, but we didn't get a solution"*. I looked around me at the faces watching the speaker and glanced at the panel to check their reactions. There was a hum of approval. I thought: *'it's brave to suggest to government officials that pastoralist citizens are not being heard, it is challenging the government. His point is that government is responsible in one way or another for the fighting and violence. I wish I could find a solution for them.'*

Readings on power, intimidation and colonialism had encouraged me to frame the situation as an oppressive one. I thought of behaviours, structures and psychologies of political and bureaucratic interaction. I chose these frames because of notions of hegemony and dependency prevalent in my work in the university and in the fraternity of international aid agencies, outlined by the likes of Paolo Freire, Robert Chambers and many others (Freire 1972; Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986; Foucault 1995; Chambers 1997; Shapiro 2006). It tied up with my own experience. When I heard pastoralists giving out lists of needs, I thought their obsequiousness would exacerbate disrespect and bind them in dependence to people who did not have their interests at heart. I was frustrated and anxious. You can imagine my gestures: my back was a little bent and my expression morose. I twisted round in my chair and whispered with my neighbours about when the tea break would be.

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Six months later I was in the same town, sitting under a tree at a four-day meeting of pastoralists, on which they had invited us to collaborate. They had brought together several clans to discuss serious problems and solutions and put these to government. My understanding of what our collaboration would mean in practice changed as time went on, from the first request for our help

in late March 2004, (when I imagined hordes of people arguing feverishly in different constellations under trees, orchestrated by a tense but occasionally brilliant facilitation team including myself) to the day when the meeting was over and we looked back at how it had actually gone.

Sarah, Jarso, Alastair and I discussed our theories. They needed our financial guarantee for the meeting, that was clear enough, but they had also asked for our “protection”. I felt proud that they wanted us to protect them. I felt we could, but also that we couldn’t. I saw forces bearing in on the pastoralists’ institutions and culture. When they asked Robert Chambers to come I was pleased, relieved and a bit jealous. They said it was because they had seen what he could do in a meeting between pastoralists and government that we had organised together earlier in the year; how he could make a meeting a different space, where people saw each other anew and people gained knowledge. New paths away from old problems would suggest themselves. Robert was my colleague from the Institute of Development Studies, my original mentor there. He is in his seventies, a living champion of a participatory life, a jewel, boundlessly enthusiastic and a delight to be with. I was relieved because I felt that I could not facilitate such a meeting of 200 pastoralists, plus people from government and international agencies, on my own. I was awed by the numbers, awed by the subject matter, awed by the people who were to come. We were being invited to join in the mediation of a long and violent conflict. This was a moment we had been anticipating. I imagined failure: angry words, arrogant statements, secret betrayals. I imagined the army coming in. I imagined success, peace and plenty.

At our hotel in the centre of Yaballo town, a ring of wooden chairs, shifting with the shade as it moved from one side of the courtyard to the other, was in constant use by groups of elders of different clans and tribes, the logistics team, the government administrators, the spies, the parliamentarians, the organising committee. Our task was mainly to arrange the chairs and to listen.

At first I was nervous. In the preparations for the meeting there had been rumours that changed the colour of the air even in our house in Addis Ababa. The spiritual leader is not pleased; the merchant group has taken over; the government is trying to control the event; the Islamic groups are trying to convert everyone; the Gabra want to have separate land from the Borana; there have been killings in Negelle; people will get killed for speaking out...

Our facilitation team came into Yaballo a few days before the meeting. Robert from UK and Taghi from Iran arrived along with Marco the Italian anthropologist. Jarso and I welcomed them to town, a place with a school, a market and two petrol stations. Marco went off into the town to see what was going on, while Robert, Taghi and I talked about what we would do. We created scenarios and possible activities. Each day the organising committee came to us and said ‘we don’t need you yet, maybe tomorrow. Just keep on listening.’ Each day we sat on an anthill and listened to the meetings, and Marco came back from town with stories of who was saying what about what. As the days went by I slowly began to realise that we really might not be called to facilitate at all. But we felt we had to stay ready. Like the group of

vultures who came to settle on the tree near where the bull would be killed for the opening feast, we hopped from one foot to the other, watching, listening and questioning in quiet voices. Robert said it was exhausting. Taghi told stories and shared nuts. I began to feel my shoulders lifting and gravity letting go of its hold on my feet. A red-billed hornbill flew across the field.

As I sat and listened, I heard the pastoralists say what I considered to be brave things. What they said made sense to me, but I feared that the government officials would not like what was said, and if they disapproved, they could be very harsh. It was the job of government to tell the people to become farmers, and it was not the job of the people to disagree. But listen to this:

**Godana:** 'I do not support Wako's idea. I want to give my own opinion. Farming has some advantages, but not many. Because our area is arid, there is not much advantage with farming. The agricultural system takes place outside our rule and regulation that protects the *tula* (wells) and the *ardha jila* (land). The people are cultivating in the bottom of the valley where water flows and it is silting up the ponds. They are cultivating at the edges of the traditional water areas like Weebi. In Liban, the *yaa'aa* (parliament) has lost the settlement place on the *goro* (hills) as well as in the *diidaa* (plain): everywhere is cultivated, and they are closing and privatizing the land. To perform the ritual, the *yaa'aa* was forced to break the fence and implement it in the cultivated place. The owner of the field came to complain with the *gadaa* (council), and he argued and fought with a stick. Some people were hurt and a camel was killed. People are enclosing the land for their private sakes. They should enclose only the ploughed land, but they have expanded it to include a large area around it. This is robbing us of common grazing land. It should be completely banned.'

'KEEP ON LISTENING,' the elders counselled firmly. I think that they were keeping us doing what we were doing, because it was strangely useful to them. We were there, a hovering international presence. We made spaces, apparently innocently: the circle of chairs in the sunny courtyard, the anthill on which people visited us aside from the main meeting, an officially neutral place in the meadow.

I had believed that visible action was more important, because it could make me visible and powerful. I was fed up with being invisible and I felt I had to actively reverse the trend. And now I found myself (and the facilitation team I had invited from UK, Iran and Italy) useful but not central. We quietly made invisible spaces in a highly charged situation. We did not do much. We wanted our input to be light, not that we had much choice. Marco said afterwards, 'I didn't respect your non-intervention approach before, now I do.'

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I went to a meeting in November 2008 under that same tree, with many of the same elders, the same kinds of flowers in the meadow. Oddly the anthill had disappeared from view. The government officials were different too – they get moved about a lot. The quality of the dialogue was even better: analyses of land, drought, education and wealth. One woman spoke so well that the entire

meeting turned to conclude on the point she had made. When the government officials spoke, they spoke with respect – we hear you, they said. I was amazed.

By the time we reach 2009, at a gathering of 500 pastoralists not far from Yaballo, I was listening quite contentedly. Some of what was said was even more courageous than I had heard before. Other parts were just as boring to me as ever. After one of the sessions, the chairman came to us under our tree where we were sitting making a pot of tea on the fire. He asked us politely if we had any advice. I made an observation about the government officials speaking for long and saying little. I said that the audience had become bored and restless. He replied that he was aware of this, but it was part of the game. I could see the possibilities more distinctly now.

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My group gave back-up to the meetings. Within the series we developed a practice drawn from the collaboration of two cultures, African and European, pastoralist and bureaucratic. From the second meeting onwards, we (the Pastoralist Communication Initiative team and the leaders of Borana, Guji, Gabra, Somali and Afar pastoralists) made efforts to find people who could and would talk well together; these people, whether antagonists, strangers or comrades, were introduced to one another with a few words and left free to talk; old friends were helped to meet; people were made comfortable in ways they recognised as respectful; chair people made small interventions to keep the dialogue to its focus; the places we chose to meet were pleasing to the people who came. It may not seem like much to do this, or perhaps it seems dilettante, but in effect it was an appreciation, largely instinctive and confirmed through practice, of certain of the conditions of understanding and possibility. We thought of ourselves as trying to avoid methodical or political domination, instead looking for openness to the possibilities that might arise from what Habermas has called 'unconstrained dialogue', dissolving obsolete prejudices and overcoming social privileges through rational inquiry and discussion (Habermas 1971). Nonetheless the constraining political reality was clearly a fundamental parameter of the field of play and people's subversions and strategies were all part of it.

My hope in all these meetings was that the people there would make progress in their discussions about their situation and potential. At the first meeting in 2004 they attempted, relatively unsuccessfully under the chairing of one they defined as a colonial overlord, to talk across the mighty cultural gulf that divides pastoralist people and government in Ethiopia. At the second meeting in 2004 they talked fluidly to one another – at least until some officials arrived and called them 'backward' to their faces. They made some powerful agreements behind the scenes. At the third meeting in 2008, their conversation was brave and interesting, and the government officials who came were respectful and engaged. It was a pleasing progression. The fourth meeting showed that the progression was not only in one direction – once again there were many lengthy speeches by outsiders saying only that the pastoralists should change their ways, and many pastoralists stood and agreed with them.



It was so strategic I wondered if the people might forget which parts made up the smokescreen.

In the first meeting the subject matter was obscured by the critique in my head and had I not written it down in my notebook I would have forgotten it. I judged that the pastoralists were not improving their negotiation position and I entered into a mode of criticism. I believed that those sitting on the panel were asserting rather than listening, and restricting rather than opening up, but I did not notice that I too was doing the same, until I analysed it later. It was only the pastoralist leaders who were probing for openings. In general, I felt, the meeting presented little in the way of possibility.

Notebook or no notebook, I did not forget the cavernous room, the faces of the pastoralists gripping their tall sticks as they concentrated, the junked rusting machinery in the yard outside infiltrated by yellow flowers, and the government chairman in his dark leather jacket (who had showed me a list of the “agreements of the meeting” before the meeting had taken place). At the time I paid attention not to the hackneyed critique in my head, but to the drama of the event: its scenery and staging, its tragic-comic encounter of these historically positioned worlds. My internal critique put the rest of it, the public conversation, out of my reach. The drama was where I could probe for possibility, and where I could glance at co-conspirators on the benches beside me and look for ways out of our predicament. I felt the stultifying effects of assertion and later on I discussed with my colleagues and some pastoralist leaders about how to organise other meetings in ways that would liberate people’s voices in the debate. My sense of drama and irony had at least allowed me some freedom to innovate.

During the second meeting I was at greater liberty to listen. The phrases were fluent and pithy. I admired the people who spoke, not for their status, but for the simple trueness of their speech. They never said more than was needed. The burden of directing the conversation was not mine, nor was I overcome by a clamour of critique, so I had an opportunity to hear a bit better. I was worried about having brought a team from three countries to help with the facilitation, and now we were all sitting on an anthill together just listening. But we agreed that we had a role on the anthill, being unlikely protectors of free speech, and my co-facilitators were as fascinated by the scene, by what was said and what was happening to us, as I was. More than anything else, the matter that occupied me was the distinct difference between that meeting and other ones I had been to. It was being run by the pastoralists in their own way, and I judged it to be efficient and fair. Every so often someone would say something that clinched the argument – about land, or education or conflict and I was intrigued by the instantaneous way in which a consensus was agreed. It came out through the mood, not by a vote, nor by the domination of the chair. A person would second what had been said, and that, and the mood, was enough for a decision, apparently, to be made.

By the third and fourth meetings, I had become familiar with the skills of the people running the meetings and taking part, their eloquence and carefulness never failed to raise my interest. I could hear what was said with greater



resonance, because I had come to understand the subjects they were talking about over the years.

## **Being interested**

I was listening. My interest in the subject and direction of their discussion arose on the one hand from my solicitude for the pastoralist communities and the leaders whom we were getting to know, and on the other hand from a wish to validate and improve a method that we were developing – of inviting particular people to meet one another and discuss whatever they needed to discuss. I wanted to see if there were new possibilities of meeting and understanding or not. I was open to what they were saying and how they were saying it. I wanted to hear how they would work with the potentials that presented themselves for improving their negotiation position with government, or for doing things among themselves.

There were different modes of listening. I can distinguish the forms even in my body language: I slumped over a little to criticise, leant forward to hear when I was anxious, and sat on the grass with my legs stretched out before me when I was feeling free to listen. When I really heard something I was making distinctions between what it was and what it was not. I was applying what I heard to myself and what I already understood. I was not trying to judge it as valid against a binding ideal (BT 198). Neither was I making generalisations in my mind. I was asking questions. Some involved expectations – I was suspicious that speakers might have been co-opted by corruption and were thus using empty rhetoric; I was hoping for free speech and new institutions of accountability as an outcome of all our work. But there were also open questions like ‘what kind?’ and ‘how?’ and ‘how does that fit?’.

What made for the moments of openness that meant that I was listening to others rather than closing off what they had to say as soon as I had heard a minimum amount? One of the particularities of these debates was that the subject of pastoralist ways of life was alien to my culture, and I was listening to others more expert than I about something that I wanted to know. I was aware of my ignorance and that of those other outsiders who I hoped to see influenced.

What is the ontological basis of being interested? I was ontologically bound to what was at hand in the world, what was there to be used, what would have an effect, and with which I co-existed. I had interest in those things. I had ears to hear, eyes to see and so on. The things that were being talked about – land, animals, councils, policies, conflicts – mattered to me. They were being disclosed through the speech of the pastoralists and government officials. I felt involved in their potential. I was *interested*. My understanding as I listened was a kind of throwing or being thrown forward, or projection, into possibilities. Heidegger explains that I project myself into the world with interest, because my being knows that possibility is possible, and that things are available, or threatening, and so it is that I always project myself beyond my experience and towards potential (BT 184-185).

I projected my interest in a world of communication. If listening to what is said is being open to the world and to its future, listening to others is being open to the truths that they can tell us about the future. Listening supposes concrete possibility and horizons of disclosure (BT 206). It accepts the address of the other and the potential that it bears, it is prepared for the other to tell us something (TM 298). Conversely Heidegger outlines how assertion has the effect of '*restricting*' our view and confining what is heard within this or that character (BT 197-8). Listening understands already and yet it expands horizons. When I heard what was said I did not just perceive tones and sounds and then interpret them, I heard what people were saying about the grass and the markets, the young and the old, history and modernity and images and sentences formed in my mind (BT 207). Some of the speakers might have been lying, dissembling, or being idealistic, but what they were saying was about something. I listened.

With listening as a fundamental aspect of being, I did not choose whether to listen, but the way I listened varied. The way I heard and interpreted the things discussed, the way I was affected by the places we sat and the people who were there was affected by the particular mode of listening that the situation demanded. I was *captivated*.

While observing that *'solicitude dwells proximally and for the most part in the deficient or at least the indifferent modes'*, Heidegger suggests that where our relationships are most understanding, lively mutual acquaintanceship *'often depends upon how far one's own Dasein [Being] has understood itself at the time; but this means that it depends only upon how far one's essential Being with Others has made itself transparent and has not disguised itself'* (BT 162). The more I noticed being with others, the more I heard.

As I noticed being with others, I also noticed the absence of others. I did not necessarily know who those absent ones were, just that there were potentially many more who could have added their voices to the debate. It is this that Gadamer's critics tend to emphasise, that conversation is always more exclusive than it is inclusive. When one woman spoke and gave an incisive comment at the 2008 meeting, I could hear that it was grounded in the debates of the kitchen where she and her sisters sat and discussed matters of family and future. It reminded me of all the women who were not there. But the mode of understanding is the mode of understanding, including its historically affected social arrangements, however deficient in inclusion. She showed that variety of voice and perspective, when it is heard, clearly makes a difference to the quality and content of understanding.

## **Application**

There was a distinct variation in the degree to which I expected and allowed what was being said in the four meetings to say something to me. At the first meeting, whereas I allowed the place and its drama to address me and retained a vivid memory of it, the spoken words said very little to me. I had heard them before and they offered no new experience. But I wrote them down and years later I reviewed them and remembered what was running through my head at the time. I remembered my criticisms and I considered them. I saw how I was dimming down possibilities and preventing experience by assuming I knew what was happening. As Gadamer says, if I had been truly hearing, I would have been letting myself be told something and keeping myself open to the truth claim that was within what addressed me (TM 362). It is interesting to note that in the end I

did hear something of what was said, because years later I returned to the notes and thought about them, allowing them to tell me something at last. From that I learned that even the most boring situation is telling me something. I gained a little hermeneutical consciousness: *'The hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma'* (TM 362).

Heidegger and Gadamer both explain that to hear, one has to already understand something that makes what is heard recognisable (BT 208, TM 269). It is not the kind of understanding that generalises and closes off, but the kind of understanding that recognises and opens up. We situate, says Gadamer, the meaning of what we are hearing *'in relation to the whole of our own meanings'* (TM 268). As I listened to what was said, I inevitably applied it to myself, in the sense of making it my own, making a picture of it, imagining the people and their land as they walked over it and talked about it under their trees, remembering my previous visits to pastoralist places, beautiful rangelands and dirty towns and my previous encounters with their words about it all. I fitted the things I heard about into this horizon, coming forward with my perspectives and silently offering them to be ameliorated by the new explanations.

In the process I was bound to those others in understanding through the things we were talking about. It was not that we understood exactly the same way, but we were together considering the same thing. The claim that was being made by the words, about farming or markets or law, was being understood at each moment in a new and different way. The presence and reaction of important officials, of venerable leaders, of women who were involved in trade and women whose children came back from school speaking an incomprehensible language made for new interpretations and new resonances. It became clear that understanding was not objective knowledge of the state of the land, government, education or trade, but an event of tradition and negotiation on those subjects (TM 309). My and others' interpretations were situated within that event of tradition, and contributed to a process of handing down and handing on (TM 309). The interpretations that each of us made belonged to the objects that we

were interpreting and bound us and our histories to the way those things were now known in that part of the world.

We were taking part in a dialogue between tradition and possibility as much as between one idea and another. Even though I was silent, mostly, I was engaged in the dialogue. The words were addressing me as directly as anyone else (TM 462). They gave me access to the world that the speakers and the listeners were mutually concerned with. The words included me in the tradition from which they came and which swept onwards, with me now included, my encounters and ideas forever influenced by what I had heard.

Sitting and listening to the debate gave me an opportunity to look closely at understanding as it plays out across boundaries that interested me, where there is alienation and differences of norms, and where politics are raw and a matter of survival. I can see many elements of understanding at play within the conversation: prejudice, tradition, consideration, indifference, absence, provocation, projection, possibility and fusion of horizons.

When I noticed that my own facilitation was acting primarily as a diversion, my question about methods for promoting understanding evaporated. I did not think that there was someone else doing it better in a different corner of the field. I understood that the question was not about facilitation. The people coming to talk did not need or want a facilitator. They wanted an opportunity to understand something. They wanted to converse on a question that they agreed upon. And, as you will see from the story of the gatherings in the next chapter, they had a question that had a sense of direction. Their meetings had chair-people and rules, but the requirement was not methodological: it was to pose, clarify and discuss their apposite question between them. They understood and developed their question because they understood its horizon, its acuity, its moment, its direction and its interlocutors.

## **The art of dialogue**

In this section I have concentrated on the art of listening and the dynamics of dialogue. A dialogue, in which the *logos* embraces the people and the subject

shows itself to create a certain kind of comportment in its participants. Gadamer speaks of it as the *'art of questioning even further'* (TM 367). The participants must not speak at cross-purposes; speakers assure that the listeners are with them. One must *'allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented'* (TM 367). One must try to bring out the real strength of what the other is saying. One must prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. *'What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know'* (TM 368).

The dialogues conducted by the pastoralists focused on things that each person could see and talk of clearly, they seemed prepared to hear one another, prepared to expand their horizons, prepared to concede the point to whoever spoke it well. They favoured a good proverb that encapsulated tradition, wisdom and humour. There was a certain amount of directive from the chair, admonishments to keep to the subject, not to bring in hearsay, to keep speeches short. For me I learned about listening, what it meant to attend and not attend, to be interested and captivated. I learned how a clear focus on the thing of the discussion itself, the land, the law, the fighting, made listening easy and coming to an agreement happen.

### ***Three pastoralists on understanding***

I now turn to three of the people who were at all or some of these meetings; Borbor Bulle, Nura Dida and Godana Did Liban. I report on a long conversation I had with them in 2007 about their perspective on understanding. They do not refute any of the thinking that I had gained from Gadamer; rather they nuance and add texture and additional insight to it. Blanchot, quoted by Donald Marshall, describes a conversation between two very different people: the first spoke and then the second, using quite different words, expressed the same propositions. Blanchot says *'this redoubling of the same affirmation constituted the strongest of dialogues. Nothing was developed, opposed, or modified: and it was manifest that the first interlocutor learned a great deal and even infinitely from his own words*

*repeated, not because they were adhered to and agreed with, but, on the contrary, through the infinite difference'* (Marshall 2004:139).

## Clarity

We met in Yaballo on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2007, and we talked for two days. On the third day we joined Godana at her house and Borbor went off back to his house in Dubluk. Borbor, Nura and Godana are the elders being consulted. Jarso is translating and listening. Patta is asking questions and Abdia is listening. Borbor is the chief historian of the Borana people. He holds in his head not only the law but also the history of six centuries of Borana councils. Nura is an elder, a strategist and a leader. Godana is an elder who can ask a clever question, a wise old mother. Abdia is a young woman from Kenya who I am working with.

We went to a little shop and bought some tea and sugar. Then we drove along the tarmac road that runs north and stopped at a place called Haro Bake. Here tall yellow *Acacia* trees grow along a sandy valley. There is a cluster of tatty wooden and thatch buildings and striated animal paths in the sand. We paced about a bit, from one tree to another, looking for a good one to sit under. We laid some mats on the ground. Then Abdia and I made a fire and she put on the milk for tea. Once it was made, I introduced my questions. I asked, *'I am interested in coming to understandings across cultures. I want to ask how you come to understanding in your culture.'*

**Borbor:** 'Listen, this story is very important. When Amhara people came from the highlands and captured our land Borana, the Amhara had guns. Just before they arrived, the Borana had been involved in a fight with guns with the British and Italians. There were many people wounded in that war, and there were many stories going round about how dangerous guns were. When the Amhara came, people ran to Kenya because of the guns, some never came back. But they did not know what kind of guns they were; they could have even been sticks. The *Qallu* (traditional leader) went to the Amhara to find out what the Amhara wanted. Instead of collecting facts, the *Qallu* made an agreement with the Amhara because his people had already decided that the gun was dangerous. He came back with small flags and said if you have these then you will be safe.'

**Nura:** 'There are principles that need to be in place for understanding to be established. First, the originator of the thing to be understood has to be very clear and very sure. He has a firm position. Only when you understand crystal clear will you be able to pass that understanding on. Second, the other party needs to be listening to understand: he needs to have no view about what he is listening to understand. He is not listening to comment, but listening to understand. What you need is first clarity from the originator and second attentiveness of the listener. The person who has clarity of understanding, the originator, tries to explain and on the other side the person has to listen. Then the other person is expected to ask

questions to clarify and the understanding is transferred bit by bit. Understanding starts forming in the listener's head, and eventually he says it back to the other person. Unless he has done that then it is pointless to start discussing.'

**Borbor:** 'The worst thing in Borana culture is this thing we called falsehood. Lack of clarity leads to lies. If something is not clear it is a step towards falsehood. This falsehood comes in many ways. It could be something from the imagination that is not a fact. It is something in the mind. For it to be factual there has to be evidence and you have to see it. The thing that leads you away from clarity is the action passed on but which you have not seen. You can clarify in two ways. First you can see it yourself, you are physically present. Second you can hear a story from somebody who has seen it and that image is transferred to you. The difference between seeing it and hearing about it is that hearing about it can lead to a lack of clarity. You are looking for pasture and you meet somebody on the way and they tell you it has rained in Yaballo. You go back to your village and move your animals. When you get to Yaballo you find there is no pasture. Maybe the person was not lying, maybe it had rained, but there is no pasture. There was a lack of clarity in what was understood.'

**Nura:** 'Clarity is being sure, not only being sure but confident that the situation does not change its home. It is getting it clear and clean. Seeing it and understanding it clearly is far from falsehood. For you to be able to speak, first you have to understand it yourself. Speaking before understanding is the beginning of lack of understanding. Say, for example, Patta is asking us questions about understanding, only when she is clear can she go to explain it. For example, I am walking by the road and I meet sheep and goats and then I meet a man whose sheep are lost. I cannot say anything about those sheep that I saw, unless I have looked at the evidence. The colour, the marks, female or male, and then when someone asks, I can speak. If you speak from your imagination, it is false. When someone asks you a question he assumes you understand. When you understand you face the challenge of helping someone else understand. Seeing is for your own understanding, speaking is for someone else's understanding, you can't speak until you understand.'

I could not but interpret what I was hearing from a Gadamerian point of view. I heard prejudice and encounter, openness and application. I heard what was said as a person who has spent many years with pastoralists. I have seen that they take understanding very seriously. In the arid savannas where the people are moving often very far from one another, where the consequences of a bad decision may be fatal, I have witnessed how that they put a premium on clear communication.

'What did you hear me say?' they always ask.

I reply, 'I heard you say this.'



‘Do you want to clarify?’

‘No I heard you.’

‘Now you can give your opinion, but do not give me hearsay. Tell me what you know is true.’

The nineteenth century *Qallu* who went to appease the Amhara took with him an unexamined prejudice and it affected the whole future of the Borana people, according to Borbor the historian. What a person already understands must be clear if it is to be conveyed, it gives less chance for wrong decisions, added Nura the strategist. The listener needs to be attentive they said. Open to understanding, I interpreted.

Their idea of understanding had meaning and significance for them and it is differently rooted. Their meaning is resonant with my own and I can hear it. The virtue of their attention to clarity is that they are able to speak well and explain easily, even to a foreigner. And yet people in government and aid offices do not come to understandings with them. There is no clarity or agreement on what is happening in pastoralist lands, to pastoralist people, and what could be done. For one thing, these administrators do not focus on how they are or are not coming to understandings with pastoralists. They just forge on. The aid agencies in Ethiopia focus mainly on the poor and forget that the better off are responsible for welfare and integration, cutting society into new pieces. Ethiopian government officials seem to focus a great deal on politics and other shenanigans. Their policy of settling pastoralists is designed to suppress mobility and modernise, despite explanations of its necessity and intelligence. The pastoralists tend to focus on how their way of life is under siege. Clarity is being lost between them and within them.

I noticed the moments when my mind drifted. It was not difficult to listen; I found what they said interesting, pertinent and easy to follow. As you will notice from the way they spoke, what they said was always relevant to the question, so there was little room for me to be confused. They made references and gave examples that required experience of their world, but they did not digress. I remembered a previous conversation with Nura in which he had described the

rigorous stages of education that Borana pass through from birth to the age of 40, in which the art of listening and observing is given the greatest emphasis. When you have learned to listen and observe accurately he said, and then and only then, are you expected to give opinions. You can give them before that, but no one expects them to be particularly useful.

## Listening

So as I listened I attempted only to hear what I was hearing, to try to leave the question open, and not worry about the next question. All this was helped by the rhythmic slow pace of the conversation: a pause, Borbor speaks, and Jarso takes up the translation, Nura speaks, and Jarso takes up the translation, a pause, and round again. At a moment of high emotion, or a pause of exhaustion, I suggest a cup of tea and Abdia and I go and attend to the fire, Abdia brushing me away. And then I ask a clarifying question.

**Borbor:** 'Listening... What is listening? Let's define it. Listening is hearing actively. When you hear like that is when you will know the path to understanding. Take an example. We are hearing the goats are making noises but we are not listening. Listening is giving it attention. If you are not giving it attention you are not listening. If you are not listening you are not going to understand because clarity is not there. If we hear these goats or sheep make noise and we give it attention, next time we will be able to know which one is making the noise. When you now give it attention, out of your 1,000 animals you will be able to link the noise to the particular animal and you have understood it.'

**Nura:** 'You ask questions. If we do not listen and hear to understand what you are asking then we would not be able to reply. So we start with your question. The answer we give tells you whether we have understood your question. When Borana pass messages to each other they normally use children or elders. They call you and you listen. If you heard, you say, yes I have heard. Have you understood? Yes. Tell me what you have heard. Tell me what you have understood. And then you take the message to the other person and the other person asks you questions and later that person gives you a reply and asks you if you have heard and understood. Without that procedure the Borana never send a message. You don't send somebody you don't trust, as they must be prepared. It touches on the issue of conflict, and the interest and the belief of the other person.'

**Borbor:** 'From the elders I learned law and over many years I learned to listen, but I do not know how to speak. The emphasis of understanding is learning to listen.'

**Nura:** 'There are some people who are hasty and there is a saying in Borana: Don't burn your fingers – don't speak until you understand. Fingers mean speaking – you are putting yourself forward. Feeling and thinking is irrelevant to understanding. That is why for understanding you bring facts. This is what I saw, this is what I heard and this is what I said. This is why Borana are very clear. This is why information moves so far. The foundation of clarity is very important. The beginning of clarity is based on an explanation. There are very good speakers. There are others who are good listeners but can't speak. Some people fumble around. Some are very articulate. The fact that you can explain is clarity that leads to understanding.'

**Patta:** 'How do you arrive at a question that will help you to understand?'

**Borbor:** 'You don't ask a question when you are clear. There was something said that was not heard then you ask a question. Questions are between two things: first the statement made and second the fact that you are asking.'

**Nura:** 'Somebody can explain something very clearly but you understand it differently. If you go and explain it without asking questions you may get it wrong.'

**Borbor:** 'Reaching understanding is not a question of chit chat. It requires clarity of where you are coming from and establishing what knowledge you have. The other person needs to appreciate where you come from. For example, you are discussing something about a cow and this person thinks Boran cow and you think Friesian cow. But when you come to specifics you don't understand each other.'

**Nura:** 'You must cultivate strength. Reaching the strength to overcome your own weakness, you work on yourself. You know yourself; you try to understand the person. You work on that. Often it depends on the behaviour and character of the person who is advising you. They can help you cross bridges. You come and sit next to them. They will be knowledgeable and paying attention and they will be able to help you clarify things that you fear and don't ask. They will draw you in until you are encouraged and given inspiration. There is a mother who has a certain character or a kind of behaviour who wants to help you. She gives you a seat; she guesses all the questions that you have. If you find a mother who is quiet, or is in a certain posture then that person will be able to help you overcome your fear.'

**Borbor:** 'In the shade there are some very knowledgeable elders who are very articulate and even though they can easily understand, they create a clever obstacle to closing the discussion too early. They are so brilliant. They know that clarifying questions makes the situation more questionable and understandable. And they know that wives and mothers can do that. So the elders postpone the meeting and allow time for the issue to be resolved with their wives. When they start asking questions, (when

normally they come to clarification very quickly), they are giving time for everyone to overcome whatever is holding them back.'

Borbor and Nura said that listening is paying attention and attention is focusing on the thing being talked of and nothing else. Listening to the other's question and replying to it and only to it, is the art of arriving at clarity. It keeps with the sense of direction established by the situation itself. Listening is application and having a sense of direction.

I hear again their mobility and concern to maintain the liquidity of communication, just as I also hear my own concerns with clarity in order to understand and be understood in my context. I hear recognition of prejudice and the dangers of not saying that you do not know, and of the value of making a thing 'questionable'. It seems that understanding has a circular structure of continuous communication: listening attentively, seeing accurately, probing, aligning, conveying clearly, and listening attentively and on. I thought of psychology when Nura spoke of the need to be strong to work on understanding and inquiry despite embarrassment, but their 'psychological' and mine are no doubt different. The embarrassment that Nura has described to me at other times relates to failing the group, the family, the clan, the world, not failing the self.

### **Cross-cultural encounter**

**Patta:** 'Can you come to understandings with someone of another culture?'

**Borbor:** 'Two people meet. When you meet you just talk. You do not listen to understand, you listen to hear the talk. The person is telling you something. It is interesting, it is entertaining, or perhaps there is something you are looking for. If what they are saying gives you inspiration that really there is something, then you want to understand! Until then you are just talking.'

**Nura:** 'Cultures are different and for different cultures there is no way you can understand one another unless you expose your cultures to one another, raw. So you need to help that person to understand a culture. It requires time. I agree with Borbor. Most of the time we do not listen for understanding. You find it is not necessary to struggle to understand because the point was made for the moment. You have to explain why do you want to talk to me? Why me in all the world?'

**Borbor:** 'Borana believe if you learn from your father it is good, but if you tell people stories from your grandfather it is more believable. The classification that people give you – liar, joker, serious etc – is commonly known and affects whether people listen to you well. Their idea about the guidance you got, the coaching and the rehearsal is important. It doesn't necessarily mean if you are rich you know more, it depends on the people who grew up around you. If you are an outsider you will also be graded or classified or tagged as trustworthy or not. If they don't know you, they might tag you according to the institution you have come from. They might judge you instantly based on what you say, or on stereotypes of institution or ethnic background. Whichever mechanism that delivered you to the spot you are speaking to them in, whether you are government or an ethnic group and they have already classified your group as a failure, will affect whether they listen to you or not. Then the less factual you are considered to be, the more they will just hear you, not listen to you.'

'You might be isolated as an individual if you are very clear, so even if you are from a questionable institution, they may agree on a grace period. It will depend on how factual, how credible, how clear you are. Cross-cultural communication means there is already history, culture and stereotype, but if you come across clearly they will give you a grace period. If you say I will do one, two, three things and don't do them then you lose credibility. How credible, how factual you are will affect how much interest they have in trying to understand what you are after.'

**Patta:** 'If the person in the grace period keeps her promises, so you decide she is interesting, but you still have to overcome the differences in education and culture – what is your strategy?'

**Borbor:** 'This is not difficult. It requires free and open talking. At some stage you have to get out of the structure that binds both of you. You get to a neutral ground where you can come to a common understanding. Is the place of trying to understand in the territory of one or the other? No it has to be a new territory – where you see something new. You have to get into a new space where you both have a new thing in front of you and compare what is different from what you know. You have an interest.'

**Patta:** 'You know what you think and you notice the difference between what you think and what you are hearing and you ask why. Is this what you mean by new territory?'

**Nura:** 'You could be shying away from constructing a statement because it is shameful in your culture to ask, but you are asking because you want to understand, so you can ask it – this is new territory. It is a situation of a child, nothing holds them from learning. This is new territory. You are told something. It is not enough clarification, until you see and when you see, you need to ask questions, until you believe what you see. This is new territory.'

Bringing forward my own interpretation of Gadamer's provocation of prejudice I question the new territory, and Nura answers it in an unexpected way. His observation helps me with the question I had already posed about how prejudice comes to the foreground. I acknowledge that the shamefulness of asking is indeed an aspect of how prejudice remains hidden. I had thought of the knowingness of positivism and the academy, and the business of fear of exposure. Among other things, the freedom that Borbor talks of in his new territory is freedom to make error, to be wildly inquisitive as I was when I took the wrong bus. It is also a place where the raw elements of culture can be patiently exchanged, so that appreciation of tradition can be understood within the dialogue. In the end it is important that the fact – by which I understand them to mean the thing we are talking of, the promises or observations that we are making – is credible to the other.

I could sense that Nura and Borbor did not have entirely the same views on the matter of understanding, so I did not feel that they were lecturing me from one inflexible standpoint. I did feel the weight of experience that they were bringing to bear, and the authority that in their culture is achieved by people who have reached their position in life. Nonetheless, at the end they told me that they had learned something important from the conversation, even if it does sound like they are lecturing me.

## **Culture and institutions**

**Patta:** 'Can you tell me the effect of cultures like those of law, money, bureaucracy and religion?'

**Nura:** 'Irrespective of race, black or white, there are two things important to living. The first is law and the second is justice. People want to know and clarify law and everybody has fear or respect for the law. You fear to make a mistake because justice will be done and that is what makes you fear lying. But now the law has become so weak that nobody enforces it.'

**Borbor:** 'When you are in a leadership position your job is to help people to understand law. Lately it has gone in a bad direction and elders just speak to eat or enrich themselves. Why do people respect Nura more than they respect other elders? Because he always tries to help people understand.'

**Nura:** 'Law is held in text. The text has meaning that has to be understood. The most difficult factor is the purposes of the litigants. There could be interests for people to deny justice. It is not the text that is the problem it is the practice. Justice is ultimately about the truth. It is factual. It doesn't change its form whatever angle you look at it. If you lie you will not reach understanding with god, if you speak the truth you may not reach understanding with people. I know somebody whose nature and his being is truth. He could deliver justice and he is very brilliant but everybody hates him. It's a mix of reasons. Some are that people would easily go along with falsehood. That is why the delivery of judgement is one statement by one person. But it may take years to get there, because we are very bad at getting clarity. If you go straight you deny the opportunity for the other people to clarify. For some who are clear at the beginning they do not speak while the deliberations are going on.

'There are two people who are very brilliant; they ask clarification as it is supposed to be asked. They deliver their judgement. But people see them as dangerous because they understand things quickly, they ask right questions, they have no fear and they listen and they deliver right judgement. They point to the truth and they are very aggressive, up to putting the truth bare. They don't wait for you. If men were to go by justice as it is, the judges would move much quicker, but there would be more conflict. People would rather believe in falsehood than justice; that is why it is necessary to go on clarifying.

'People use a lot of proverbs. They use them when they have already reached understanding, for others to understand. For example the woman at the Hudet pastoralist gathering who spoke the proverb. "Men were disturbing women as there was something about women that men wanted. Women met and said why don't we cut this thing they want from us and then they will stop following us? But you can't cut it." She was trying to help men to understand that they were wanting something impossible when they wanted to separate one clan from another.'

**Borbor:** 'We are in the right track for clarifying understanding. The truth is ultimately with god and justice is truth. You are reaching understanding with god. It encourages you, and you overcome your fear and shame. Without justice prevailing, you will never be able to reach understanding.'

### ***Money***

**Nura:** 'Money is a paper with a kind of magical power. It not only breaks clarity but can make you go against principles of understanding. People kill because they have been promised money. Understanding is when things are clarified based on the truth, but you can lie consciously because of money. You are obstructing clarity. Money is also involved in changing culture and laws. People initiate meetings that have no clarity. There can be false witness. Recently a customary leader left an important religious activity one day before because he was offered money. Only money could



do that. You could have offered power and he would not have left. Money can distort facts and create confusion.'

**Borbor:** 'But you can use it in the reverse, you can use money to unlock all that. You can hire someone. Money is not a bad thing in itself. It can do good things that are completely the opposite. You can use money to do good things. It establishes communications. A person who is poor and hungry, his senses are broken by starvation, you feed the person and then he can speak to you.'

### *Bureaucracy*

**Nura:** 'You can capture all of truth, but without justice all the clarifications are useless. You need a strong legal system and delivery of justice. Unfortunate situations create opportunities for bad things to happen. Nobody is taking care at those times. Leadership becomes weak. They may make the situation worse. It is a new thing we have learned from this discussion. We understand the question of clarifying what are the bad situations that bad leaders are taking opportunity from. We want to process it. For now this is our response. We have always believed in black and white. We do not have a talent for grey.'

**Borbor:** 'Bureaucracy does not clarify things.'

**Nura:** 'It clarifies something very clearly: bureaucracy clarifies the existence of injustice. It makes you see that you have no rights in certain things. It makes you understand. Something that can be decided instantly can be rescheduled for two months and then not honoured. The small guys are the most problematic. It is a very unfair system. It clarifies that injustice is here to stay.'

**Patta:** 'You both seem to be saying that you can't come to an understanding with a bureaucrat.'

**Nura:** 'This takes us back to the money debate. In the bureaucracy it camouflages character of the people working in the system. Some people in the system are looking for something. You will never see it with your eyes. Some fear the boss; some create difficulties, because they say they are too busy. If you bribe the watchman or secretary you get to see the boss in two minutes. Few of them sit down under a tree and discuss. Few of them are about commitment. Bureaucracy is not our thing, it is someone else's territory and we have to play by their rules.'

### *Religion*

**Borbor:** 'One single most difficult thing that creates lack of understanding is religion. It relates to the fundamentals of what religion is all about and whether it can be clarified. Borana heard about Islam. Some Borana chose to be Muslims and they continued to be pastoralists. Some continued to be Boran. The common language they use for daily life is the same. If



somebody becomes a Muslim or a Borana it is OK. But when a new religion is introduced, one that moves on power that is not fully explained, when there are guns involved, then you cannot clarify. The missionaries came. They did not clarify anything. They first came and helped the poor. They came at a time of drought and they helped. But they bring up children in a strange way. In facing that challenge a new type of Muslim arrived – bringing Islamic counter-arguments. These ones also deliver relief and development. They do all the things Muslims do, but they also do all the things that Christians do. This brings confusion.

‘You have the government, the missionary, the new Muslims. The Muslim restaurants were separate from the Christian ones. Then came democracy, which said that you can do what you want because you want to do it. So you will never clarify the issue of religion in Borana. It has confused Borana. Even among the Christians there is confusion. They are arguing among themselves. Why did it all start? Religion is the one most important thing that created lack of clarity, whichever religion. It depends on who you are talking to.

‘There are people who want to clarify this. In one family there may be Islam, Boran and Christian. It is democracy that spoiled us. Not one of them sits down and clarifies to each other. They just get on with life. Us elders, we are now observing what is happening around us. We see what it means to get lost. What it means to get extinct has become clear as we see the implication of the behaviours.’

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The next day we went to Godana’s place and sat outside her house. We took milk and tea with us. Nura told Godana what we had been talking about.

**Godana:** ‘I am satisfied with what you said. One more point: I agree that [there is] damage, yet I still believe that the memory is working. But do men still retain things and do men still observe? They are not stupid. It is something to do with the way you learn things. In the past learning was a long life process and knowledge had no limit. Now you start education and you learn for four years and then you have finished. With that attitude you are always in a hurry. Ideally education doesn’t finish. That is why people turn to papers because the education you finish is in the paper. You think you have nothing to learn from people because you assume it and you think all the learning is in the paper. You read books and do not talk to anybody.’

**Nura:** ‘This concept of finishing education is something to do with work: you qualify for a job – because you are interested in the job.’

**Godana:** ‘There is one old woman called Galma Halake. The father of Halake told her that if you have not been properly educated or if you have not gone to school you have completed your work. When you are

properly educated your work will never end. You will be imagining things. You will be developing your vision, and you will have things to work on. If you are not properly educated your job is to take animals to pasture. If you are properly educated you pay attention all day, you are looking at the environment and you will be able to make analysis of what you are going to do next year. If not, you will just take animals out and bring them in again.'

**Patta:** 'I am hearing that education is developing capacity to pay attention. In our language education means more than just going to school, although some people think of it as just about schooling. Is it the same with you?'

**Godana:** 'Her father never told her it is about writing or reading, education is learning from a trusted source. It is knowledge you gain from a trusted source that enables you to pay attention. There are different names. Education of reading and writing is normally referred to in Borana as education that you can finish. The implication is that you go and get employment after you have got it. The other is the education that you keep on with. You will be referred to by others, they will say that you are a listener, you are good at paying attention and you speak truth. There is no end to paying attention to speaking truth.'

**Borbor:** 'People have lost hope, they have surrendered. There is a lot of inertia. There is also a lot of division and disagreement. There may be two people who are talented, who could create a vision, but if they come together they will be on opposing sides because of, for example, religion. They are antagonistic. Traditionally people cared for each other but it is also a matter of necessity that they require leadership. The government has lost direction. It is an unclear government system. In one family now there may be Islamic, traditional and Christian religions. It is democracy that spoiled this. Democracy means you can do what you want because you want to do it. Not one of them sits down to clarify to each other. They just get on with life.'

**Nura:** 'The culture has changed since government came. People are still making a transition; they have not been completely overrun. The people have not let go of their own culture. There is a tug of war between old and new cultures. In the past if you lied there was a penalty. If you lie now there is no penalty or there is even a reward. It used to be that people who lie were known and they knew themselves and they knew people knew them, so it didn't cause much damage. Now everyone is lying. The confusion is a mix of two ways, neither is clear to the other. Nobody is paying attention.'

**Godana:** 'It has been prophesied that on the verge of collapse the system will come back. The people will not be extinct but confused. Nobody will be able to clarify anything. They will start consuming alcohol. They will get lost and those who get lost will start eating *enjera*. They will be scattered all over the place. Near the end most of them will refuse to accept the truth. Almost at the collapse, somebody knowledgeable will be born. All that was

predicted has come true except this last one. This is the one we are looking for.

**Nura:** 'People will change. Change will come from discussion and these discussions are the ones that will help people clarify confusion. There is magic in it. It is like the discussion we are having here: setting and clarifying things until we understand. When we talk we can help each other understand things.'

I looked up at the white afternoon sky, through the thin leaved branches of our shade tree. I said, 'Thank you, thank you.' Godana smiled, got up and went back into her house.

I had been reading Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* and I recognised his decoupling of the lifeworld and economic and administrative steering systems in my own cultural horizon (Habermas 1984b; 1984a). Did it have any resonance for the Borana people? I had been observing what I thought were the effects of new administrative, economic and political systems in their land. I was aware when a new question popped into my mind that it came from a prior prejudice. I could see the pattern of my questions, their sources from what people were saying along with questions that had been arising in my reading and prior encounters. My questions about clarity and listening had arisen with the earlier conversations with Nura, the ones about bureaucracy, money, law and religion came with Habermas, and those about new territory and prejudice with Gadamer. I felt, nonetheless that the questions came at the right moment; they did not appear to make the conversation falter and change the direction it was moving in. The direction was set by the subject of understanding. The Borana discipline in keeping to the subject kept the direction straight.

All the institutions that we talked of were causing confusion, as far as the elders were concerned. Clarity was haemorrhaging from them as from an unbound wound. But then Nura said there was magic in discussing and coming to understandings about understanding. At least our discussion fed into that same great river of pastoralist clarity which Nura described in the previous section. We had done something good in conversation.

## The infinite difference of affirmation

In both the sections above I have considered the arising of understanding within dialogue. Dialogue shows here the structure of understanding on a larger scale than I have considered up till now. Whereas I have been focusing on an individual me, projecting into the future with questions from the grounds of her tradition, here I am releasing her into the lifeworld. In dialogue the thing we are talking about takes hold of all of us who take part and gives each a wealth of angles and moments to consider and reconsider. The debates are patterned by the cultures, places, procedures, rituals and powers at play in the event.

Dialogue shows how understanding arises from a multiplicity of influences of tradition and a multiplicity of potentials. Each person speaking, each one listening and pondering and each infinitely different version of the thing under discussion makes a contribution. I cannot know where I will be in terms of new prejudices, but to take part means that I know that each of us will arrive somewhere beyond where we started, our horizons expanded and to some extent fused.

I have not focused on dialogue as a political exercise, or as an ideal method for arriving at human harmony, but as a structure of understanding as it happens to people as they cast their gaze on the things of their concern. My own experiences and those of the three elders affirm that modes of listening, attention and clarity/confusion are always at work in understanding. They are called into action in dialogue. As Gadamer says, we *submit* to dialogue if we are involved in it at all. To listen and be interested means to admit ignorance, to be clear means to be able to speak the limits of what I know. When I am part of a dialogue, which is most of the time, I am absorbed in language, listening to and being influenced by an infinite number of possibilities and challenges.

*'Dialogue is not a method. It is not at the disposal of our will, even our good will. We cannot be exhorted, cajoled, or sermonized into it. No one can be forced into it - or out of it. We do not enter into dialogue, we find ourselves already in it - but only if we are already listening with the most intense attention, all ears to the discreet, the whispered word. Dialogue has no guarantees, being pure risk'* (Marshall 2004:143).

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## Chapter 8 – Understanding across a Culture

In this final chapter of my exploration into how we come to understandings, I take the question to a wider geography, by considering its flow between many people, over a period of several years, across a large area. The culture of the people involved was broadly an East African pastoralist one, and the story is taken up by Nura Dida, himself an East African pastoralist, who was deeply involved in the pastoralist gatherings in Ethiopia from 2004, if not before.

### ***Pastoralist gatherings from the pastoralist perspective***

I asked Nura if he would join my colleague, Jarso Guyo Mokku, and I to explore what had been happening with the gatherings. We were at a hotel in Nairobi in May 2008. The sun was slanting through the big window and the traffic hummed outside on Uhuru Highway. I was asking questions and adding a few things here and there. Jarso was interpreting between English and his mother tongue, *afaan Oromo*.

Before I move to the subject of our discussion, I start with a brief examination of the art of interpreting between languages, to give context to the conversation that follows. This brief exploration allows us to add more texture to some of the linguistic aspects of understanding. As a special hermeneutic case, it illustrates, I think, the coming together of traditions as horizons of meaning, the part played by environment in linguistic cadences and the strengthening of the thing itself and its bond with the speakers as it travels from one language to another.

### **Translation and interpretation**

Nura called it our agenda. At least Jarso would translate the word Nura uses in his language, *afaan Oromo*, into the English word 'agenda'. I feel I almost

understand this Oromo language; many of its modulations are familiar after six years of help from Jarso to understand the details of what is being said. Jarso translates fluently, so that neither he nor I really know which language we are in, but I am aware that the words are his, so I asked him about it.

Jarso said that he translates in order to build relationships. He is not just translating words in a technical fashion but working to create meaning.

‘I never imagine at one moment that I am translating for anybody, so I am not seeing myself in that moment as a translator. And one other thing is the connection between the communication I am involved in, in view of why am I doing it, linking to the objective, the point of communicating. There is the immediate purpose of passing the message from this person to the other, but it has to have some link with the overall goal – why am I doing this? For me, it is both for the purpose of passing the message and also for really establishing relation with the person.’<sup>10</sup>

Interpretation in this context incorporates not just the thing the original speaker is talking about, but also the interpretation of that thing by the interpreter and the interpretation of that thing by the one receiving the translation.

Jarso says, ‘There are times when you are actually translating literally word for word. That is the base. But there are times when the discussion is so deep that they won’t grasp the meaning of what is being talked about, because the words won’t make sense to them, because they mean a different meaning. In the different context, or cultures, they mean different things. So for the person to be able to understand what the other person is actually trying to say, it is very important for you to be able to know what type of stories you can tell this person so they can precisely understand the message that this person is trying to pass other than the words. And that is why sometimes I would use a story, use a story which is more or less – which I know is familiar to the person, to be able to help him understand. And then, after he has understood, that is when I will tell what the person said word for word.’

Gadamer notes that an interpreter assisting two people who speak different languages to speak to one another is a heightened instance of the hermeneutics of conversation. *‘The translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way (TM 384).* Heidegger likewise makes a point that interpretation is not something pasted on top of a perception, but that it is bound

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jarso Guyo Mokku, April 2008, Nairobi

to the instant of recognition – I hear the thing spoken of *as* something, otherwise I would not see or hear it at all (BT 189). Jarso is hearing what each of us says as something that he recognises and he is moving it into the words of the other language as just that same thing, or as near as he can make it. His understanding of what that thing is will be what he tries to put into words for the other.

Understanding does not come *after* something is interpreted, but interpretation is grounded in understanding and arises from it, as in an interpretation of a piece of music (BT 188). Understanding is not static. It is constantly on the move and interpretation creates connections and conclusions and makes and is made from the play of dialectic (TM 260).

The conversation in which Jarso is an interpreter is a conversation that includes him in a particular way. He does not give new opinions, but he brings his understanding into the play through his versions of the things being discussed. This is not only something that can be said of translation from one language to another, but also about conversation in general. Each interpreter grounds what they hear into their own horizon and each interpreter is always from a different cultural world than the other, even if they are from the same household, speak the same language, have grown up together and so on. The matter of the thing being talked of is always given greater depth by the multiplicity of horizons of its interpretation. Perfection of translation is not to find the words that mean exactly the same but the words that permit communication on what is being said.

*Afaan Oromo* is a language that sounds to me like the land it comes from. A big country with high escarpments and hot thorny valleys where the dry leaves rustle, cows grumble, hyenas woop, hornbills hoo hoo and lammergeyer eagles cry across the high thermals. I am pointing to this connection of language and geography, because I want to emphasise that these wide connections to place and physical environment are among the basic elements of understanding. These connections seem particularly important to the people of oral cultures that I have met – people who make their lives with the land. In practice, attention to my surroundings develops in me at least a rudimentary familiarity with the cadences of thought and physical reality that make sense in that place and to those people. Familiarity comes slowly, especially where our exposure has been to something



entirely different. It brings with it a broader potential for understanding, because the connection to the other is greater than the individual with whom I speak, or even just his or her human history being spoken; the earth too has a powerful influence on what and how people are saying and interpreting things. The environment is, I would argue, playing a continuous part in all our understandings, an idea that is strong in Native American and many other ecologically sensitive cultures (Abram 1996; Cheney 2005). Abram suggests that environmental cadences are particularly resonant for people who do not emphasise writing and for those who live from the land: *'the sensible, natural environment remains the primary visual counterpart of spoken utterance, the visible accompaniment of all spoken meaning. The land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates'* (Abram 1996:139).

## The gatherings

Jarso, Nura and I focused on the contribution to understanding of the big pastoralist gatherings on which we had collaborated over the last four years. Telling the story of how one after the other, these gatherings created a conversation, Nura described a debate between individuals that became discussions across entire geographies. I start the story with an introduction taken from my notes, and then move to listening to Nura.

### *The first Yaballo meeting*

I first met Nura at Yaballo in 2004. Jarso and I walked into a back room of a little hotel. The room was mostly taken up by a bare table around which were sitting a group of men wearing traditional off-white shawls and headcloths. Jarso introduced me, first to Guyo Roba, the leader of the *yaa rabaa dorii*, the retired leadership council, and then to others from his council, *hayyu*<sup>11</sup> and assistants, then to Tache Harro, the *abaa gadaa*<sup>12</sup> of the Gabra Migo and his *hayyu*, and lastly to Nura Dida. He introduced himself as a Borana elder and an advisor to the Borana *Gadaa* Council. I asked the assembly if it was accepted that the meeting should go ahead and they said, yes. They had appointed a committee to guide it. They accepted our offer to

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<sup>11</sup> A *hayyu* is a councillor and a judge. The *gadaa* council of the Borana consists of one *hayyu* from each of the major clans of the Borana. The same system is used by most of the different Oromo groups.

<sup>12</sup> The *abaa gadaa* is the 'father of the *gadaa* Council' spiritual leader and convenor of the council.

pay the costs of the meeting, and they said that two bulls had been contributed for the opening ceremony. I asked what else they wanted of us. Nothing more, they said. Later we went to another hotel and sat in the courtyard. We met more elders who came, sat on wooden chairs, talked, and went away on mysterious errands.

The meeting was in a meadow under some acacia trees. Haji Boru Guyo said that the agenda was to find a strategy to deal with drought, inter-clan conflict, and the problem of addiction to alcohol and *chaat*<sup>13</sup> and the expansion of cultivation into the grazing land. They divided into separate groups, Borana, Guji and Gabra. The Borana allowed us to take notes.

One elder said: 'The grazing land is shrinking because of cultivation. People have enclosed the land for private use, and people have started to sell the land, which is not our tradition. We should be able to protect the land through our traditional custom. The land should be divided into farmland and grazing land, which could be done by our elders with the assistance of government.'

It was quite a strong thing to say in Ethiopia, where all the land belongs to the State and it is the government that has been promoting that pastoralists settle and cultivate, giving up their old unruly ways of 'wandering around following their animals'.

The Borana group decided the following: 'Regarding farming by our own traditional elders and government assistance for this farming, the farming in ritual places should be stopped. By taking our meeting decision to the communities of our areas, the farming land should be demarcated from the grazing land. Except for community enclosure, the private enclosure of land should be stopped.' Then Liban Jaldesa, *abaa gadaa* of the Borana spoke: 'The *gadaa* is with you to strengthen your decision and all of you pass the message of decision to your district administrations and local leaders. It is all pastoralists who must decide to solve our problem.'

### **Nura's perspective**

'Every meeting has its own life. For pastoralists our life is about meetings. There is no single day without meeting. Each meeting has its own agenda, its own procedure. There must be an idea behind the meeting. After the meeting there is understanding about the issues: what was discussed and what was resolved, what are the difficulties and what is the way forward. People may not be clear before, but after they should be very clear. There is no meeting that people leave without consensus. When they go back they tell the story to each other; what they heard, understood and clarified. You start from the rules. Anything heard outside the meeting is assumed to be hearsay. Facts will be presented. If you are not prepared to speak in the meeting it is considered not known, non-existent.

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<sup>13</sup> A narcotic leaf.

‘Let’s come now to these meetings of diverse people, inter-clans inter-institutions. They are as many as those other meetings which are internal. You can have an inter-institutional or inter-tribal meeting on water, pasture, settlement or rights. We can come with different knowledge, different ideas, different interests, different laws. Basically the frame is the same, processing the idea.

‘Let us now focus on the Yaballo story as an example<sup>14</sup>. It involves the government and pastoralists and NGOs. It could be white people like you. There were many others with different laws, different knowledge, different perspectives and interests that came to the Yaballo meeting. The thing that brought them together is not the knowledge they have, is not the interest they have, it is actually the shade that brought them together with all those differences, because they all have one interest<sup>15</sup>. The future is what they have focused on. It is not the knowledge or the interest. What they have in common is the end of that meeting. That is the shade. The resolution is what is binding them.

‘So for that type of meeting when you come together [with such different people], we might be talking about livestock, it is very difficult to try to get into the story of the interests and the knowledge that we have. So each will keep their interest, keep their knowledge, everybody will keep that to themselves. So the thing to agree on with all those differences is first the agenda. And everybody will agree to the agenda based on their interests, their knowledge and whatever. Now the issue is not what people understand, it is what you are going to speak.

‘At Yaballo, first Guji, Borana and Gabra pastoralists each had their own separate meeting. We then came together before we approached the other people. Then we had a common story with Gabra and Guji, although each of us also had our own knowledge and interests. There are layers and layers of things which we left at the base, but there is one specific common line of story that we brought to the table. We wanted the other [government and NGO] people to understand that line. We would make them understand, support us on it and respond to it. We now listened to what they heard, based on whether it would enhance that new line of understanding, or it would create difficulties for us. How much of that agenda will be supported, will be opposed, this is the line that we now set ourselves to listen to.

‘The follow up that the government did after that meeting was not about the substance of the discussion. The question was how did you organise that kind of complex meeting? And we told them, our life is all about

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<sup>14</sup> The meeting took place in June 2004 and was attended by about 150 pastoralist elders and 50 government and NGO representatives.

<sup>15</sup> The shade is the place of the meeting which is under the shade of a tree. In Borana culture and that of many other pastoralists I have met, it is also the symbolic place of decisions and judgements. Shades are temporary and they become so by prayer and by the presence of the correct people.

managing such things. So we tried to help them understand our life, our laws about meeting. It is every pastoralist under the bush is expert at that.

‘Of course, that debate went very far. That is the line of how that meeting at Yaballo developed into a new line of discussion and debate. And then, this story has continued. What we talked there I have actually forgot, but the whole thing we have now emerged out that the new knowledge that pastoralists have knowledge on gatherings, they can organise meetings, they are expert on that.

‘Now before we move on you should ask clarification questions. All the things I have said, you have a right to say something about it. And I know there were a lot of things about that Yaballo thing even for us. I am not looking at any written story; I am just picking them from my mind. I just picked one line of story. And I want you to limit yourself to that line of story so that we reach with you the same level of understanding. If there is something that I said which is not clear I can reword it. If there is something I said that is surprising or brought a new thing, then you can ask a clarification question. I want us to get to the same level on the story that I have presented.’

I replied, ‘I remember at the end of the meeting, after they heard the elders speak, the government responded. I forget who it was who spoke, but he said that ‘you have not talked about this, you have forgotten about that, why didn’t you mention HIV’ or something like that. He was not polite. How did you see it?

Nura said, ‘ It was not in our interest, those things they talked about. Not because it is not an issue. It was just that it was not the reason for the meeting, it was not the story line we were discussing.’

I replied, ‘I think that you came to that meeting with an agenda. And that agenda had been taken around, I think, by Haji Boru and you. How did you build that agenda?’

He said, ‘That meeting had an owner. There were people who had put their minds to it. It was Haji Boru and Borbor who called for the meeting. They are the ones who summoned people to the meeting. And they never told people what the agenda of the meeting was. But they had said – we have an idea. So because both of them were known, people came to the meeting, coming to listen to the idea of Borbor and Haji Boru. So when they called, people came. They all came because they know both of them.’

## **To the things themselves!**

I thought the Yaballo meeting was supposed to *reconcile* people, i.e., bring into alignment the different interests and agendas of those who came, through some kind of logic or compromise, but Nura noted that the divergent interests were

secondary. The subject of the discussion was purpose, the matters of farming, conflict, animals and alcohol. I remembered hearing about the interests and agendas when we talked in the evenings – they gave each of us at the meeting a sense of dynamic and tension – but were not what it was about. A meeting, he suggested, contributes to an agreed purpose by making use of understandings that people bring. The subject is, in effect, a force that draws on and activates understandings. The subject is the thing that everyone is talking about and asking questions about. I had been thinking about reconciliation and understanding as the things that people were talking about, making them deracinated phenomena and forgetting that they intend something specific. Understanding is always understanding of something. Reconciliation is reconciliation about something. When that something is worked on, then understanding, reconciliation and so on have a chance of arising.

Purpose in meetings such as this one pulls understanding from an internal reflection to a connected deliberation. As Nura said, the common interest was the future, for which each person had a responsibility. The concrete relevance and resonance of the purpose affected the quality and degree of agreement on it, which in turn affected the understandings that came into play. In this case the subject was about who would be in control of which resources and how. The agenda was apposite and urgent for the pastoralists. I knew this from the way the elders debated what had been said long after the main meeting ended each day, from the way they stayed with it and didn't leave, and from how the conversation continued after the event. Others, who spoke at the end of different subjects that had not been on the agenda – of bandits and backwardness, for example – were less interested in the subject. I could tell because they did not answer on the subject, but added new ones. They brought less understanding to the table, heard less what others were saying and made less of a contribution to understanding in the meeting. It was this measure of agreement that Nura said that the elders were keeping an eye on.

Nura said that the shade, the tree under which we sat and debated, was a symbol of purpose and an institution that guided the way each person spoke. I was aware that our understanding was being engaged in specific ways by the place and

culture. The concept of shade has a history and powerful meaning. I focused on the place, its cultural significance, its rules of speaking and listening, and its juxtapositions of traditional and bureaucratic. Nura added that purpose and shade are one. The shade creates the possibility to speak of the purpose in a particular way. The currents of understanding are affected by both.

The conversation was about substantial things. The pastoralists did not theorise about what might be, they tended to stick to what they had seen and experienced and what could be done. It was about what was happening to the land, how they educated their children and how war was hurting people. It was the first time that I had paid proper attention to the way they focused on precise things and how they spoke and answered one another by recognising first what they had heard and then what they had to add. Their scrupulous consideration of what was, rather than what might be, caught my attention. If they do not speculate does that also mean they do not innovate? In the next part of the interview with Nura he talks of recognising potential to do things differently in a pastoralist he met from Cameroon. It is not unusual for pastoralists to copy ideas from one trusted person or group to another. I would hazard, however, that they are hardly a blue-sky thinking group of people.

When, after two days of meeting among themselves, the pastoralist put their points to people from government and NGOs, they watched intently for the reaction. Nura said that the elders listened very carefully to hear what the officials had heard. The reaction informed the way the debate unfolded in the months and years after the meeting. They were looking to see where there was support and where there was antagonism. Borbor once said to me, of the art of listening in the pastoralist way, *'when you listen like that you will know the path to understanding.'*

The Government Administrator announced that a second meeting would take place within six months and a committee would be formed. It never happened. 'When something is dead,' said Nura, 'it's buried. They buried 'Yaballo Two' because of the structures that were given the task of calling it.' It was no longer in the hands of Haji Boru and Borbor, neither was it with Nura, nor with any of the traditional Councils. It was made the responsibility of an appointed committee who could not, or would not take its purpose forward. 'But,' Nura added, 'the idea was taken far and wide. It became a storyline. It was about us doing what we needed to do for

ourselves. Every other pastoralist meeting that came was taking forward the idea. At the annual clan meetings and the meetings about water and pasture, it was added to the agenda, or it was discussed before the meeting started. The Yaballo storyline was raised at sessions wherever people were sitting to talk and tell each other stories. There were small meetings on the subject that were organised by individuals who were not at Yaballo, but who had heard the story and had the idea. They took it up. And each story added to the spiral of things that were happening.' The storyline travels. It is nourished by people's interest in exploring and developing it.

Two years passed in this way. 'Eventually,' Nura continued, 'a major opportunity came with the gathering you financed at Qarsa Dambi. The whole idea about the Qarsa Dambi pastoralist gathering was part of the discussion that was going on in every other place. So when setting the Qarsa Dambi agenda it was being influenced by the knowledge and discussion and views that came from Yaballo and that's two years down the line. That gathering at Qarsa Dambi was another big event in the whole thing. The stories that were shared after that, the impact of the process of knowledge that went into the pastoralist discussion was very, very powerful.' Qarsa Dambi is a tiny settlement of three or four houses and a roadside teahouse. Not far from the settlement the Oromo pastoralists, with help from our project, put on a great gathering of pastoralists in July 2006. 350 people from 22 countries in Africa were hosted by the elders and leaders of the Borana, Guji and Gabra peoples. The meeting was chaired by Nura, backed by a committee of the three groups. There were perhaps 275 pastoralists and another 75 government officials, NGO people, donor officials, academics and business people (Scott-Villiers 2006).

The visitors came dressed in their traditional clothes, Kel Tamachek of Mali in deepest blue, Somali men in their Indonesian *mawe'es* (sarongs) and Muslim caps, Ethiopian Oromo women in multicoloured cloths, Kordofani Sudanese in bright white *jalabiya* and turbans, Hamar from southwest Ethiopia in beads, leather and ringlets. Aid agency staff drove from Kenya up the corrugated Marsabit road, along with scores of Kenyan pastoralists Maasai, Samburu, Somali, Turkana, Rendille, Borana and Gabra in buses and minibuses. From all the lowlands of Ethiopia came Somali, Afar, Guji, Gabra, Bale, Hararghe, Kereyu, Borana, Hamar, Arbore, Nuer, Nyangatom, Dassanech and Kara. A camel cheese maker from Mauritania and another from Niger put on demonstrations. Touareg activists made impassioned speeches. Smiling Cameroonian *Lamidos* gave detailed expositions of their system of traditional government and its modern situation. Traders discussed tariffs and phyto-sanitary obstacles, elders discussed conflict, peace and governance. A camel milk bottler from Kenya showed off her wares. Wodaabe and Zaghawa musicians from Niger and Sudan played haunting desert music. The people met all day long and all night too, round fires, out the back of the camp, meeting, talking, inquiring, analysing and working things out.



‘You can’t explain the knowledge you gain,’ said Nura. ‘But when something happens and you end up responding to it in a way that you didn’t before, or to be more precise, in the way you have always done, but somehow differently, you know it has something to do with the gatherings at Qarsa Dambi and other places. Qarsa Dambi was a combination of many people coming with different knowledge. The beginning of understanding is the fact that they seemed different. They physically looked different, they spoke different languages, they had different attire, but when they spoke, what they said was exactly what we could immediately visualise. We were linked to it.’

Nura continued. ‘The other reason it was a powerful event was that its content was so clear. Everybody heard the other person. Everybody understood what was going on. Whatever you wanted to say, you said, and you were happy. Whatever you wanted to respond, you responded, and you were happy. So there was clarity in terms of articulation and clarity in terms of hearing what was said. And while each thing that was said was so localised, the diversity and distance between the people made it a global issue. It was like people were talking about your village and a village far away all at once. You remained alert. It clarifies what you already know because they have used different words to say things that you know very clearly in your own head. The details they come with add new details to your own understanding. Because of the way they explain, because of the different words they use, it expands your edge.’ He repeated it, ‘It expands your edge.’ It could have been Gadamer himself talking. There was no demolishing of what we already knew. We expanded our edges.

## Trust and surprise

What opens the edges of our horizon to expansion? What engages the edge? What brings our own understanding into play? It is difference? Is it trust? Nura expected to misunderstand the foreign pastoralists. The 2004 Yaballo meeting and its two-year tapestry of debate had kept alive a continuing question about how to organise and govern alongside the state. He was alert to that; it was the subject of a great network of discussion. As the strange pastoralist from Cameroon stood up, Nura heard him begin to speak in a foreign tongue before the translators set to work in ripples of explanation. To his surprise, Nura recognised what the man was saying about customary and state law, governing and being governed. Was it because the translator had twisted it to fit what he or she knew to be the needs of the listeners? Nura mentioned that their villages seemed like neighbours. He could *recognise himself* in what he heard. He said their villages were far apart, but felt like the same village. His understanding, with its questioning edges came



forward to be expanded in that moment of recognition and connection with the other. It was a matter of trust, recognition and difference at once.

After the gathering at Qarsa Dambi, according to Nura, the stories and understandings lived on. 'The women who ran the camp restaurants made money from the event and they invested it in local restaurants. When I go there they don't want to take money from me, because Qarsa Dambi provided them capital for their businesses. No, let me pay I say, it was just business. Of course, then we talk about the gathering. It's still alive, because every time I want to pay, it's a story, every time they want to refuse me, it's a story. And we exchange knowledge and information and it keeps going.' The capital they took home from Qarsa Dambi was a part of the flow of understanding. It made up a part of the living storyline. 'I now use that road every time I go to Moyale. There is no day I am asleep when I pass Qarsa Dambi. I look at the site.'

'For the different people,' Nura went on, 'the Qarsa Dambi story is now at the third/fourth generation. The discussion continued on. As the stories were heard, they moved from one group to the other. People would ask, 'who did you hear it from?' So and so heard it from so-and-so, who heard it from so-and so, who heard it from so-and-so, who was at the meeting. Generally the list of participants that went to Qarsa Dambi is part of the knowledge of the people now. When you meet them they say, 'ah you were at Qarsa Dambi, can I ask you something?' So the participants became an authority in relation to trying to clarify some of the good stories that people have heard. This is how it is evolving. And this is why people want another Qarsa Dambi, to refresh that good storyline. So that the number of people who hear it first hand will increase and the thing will continue and continue.'

Nura went on, 'there were major peace meetings that started at Qarsa Dambi, but which went on, like the Borana, Gabra, Guji peace meeting. There was a whole series of peace meetings after that. What energised those peace meetings and interests of the people who called them was what was discussed at Yaballo. There was a peace between Borana and Guji, there was Gabra, Borana, Garre – all these ideas – cross border discussion about peace, all these discussions were ideas that were created in the discussion at the Yaballo meeting and continued at Qarsa Dambi and then afterwards.'

'With conflict, when it is very hot we just wait for things to cool down. We help each other; remind each other what we have said. You can't talk much when the place is on fire. People are being killed. People get agitated on both sides. We don't speak up when the situation is so wrong, because we will not be listened to. The brain that is going to die in that war will not be listening. But after the dead ones are buried, now you can talk to the ones who are going to live. What we are doing is from every incident, we want to use that opportunity to tell leaders and officials to behave differently next time. It has never been like this. Now because we have been talking to

each other, people understand more about where these conflicts are coming from.'

A year later the newly registered Oromia Pastoralist Association had its first board meeting at Matahara. There were twelve members, each from a different pastoralist group in Oromia. The understanding seeded at Yaballo, discussed all over the region and consolidated at Qarsa Dambi had taken this group to this point.

'We know we have knowledge,' said Nura. 'We are first working to get fast recognition. When people realise the knowledge we have, they will value it and they will value us. We use the opportunity when we speak to speak the right thing. We speak differently from other people.'

Another elder took up the theme, 'We are leaders of people. We lead by making up our mind and sharing it with the people. If they agree with us we lead them. If they come with a new idea, we make that person a leader and follow him. We create energy. I imagine that our world is shaped the way it is because of lack of understanding: they of us and us of them. They [the government and aid agencies] don't understand the choices we make, or the way we use our wealth. And we cannot learn the world as there is a lack of peace. Peace will lead to a new situation of where our minds will be.'

In October of that year the new Oromia Pastoralists' Association called clan leaders from all the Oromo pastoralist groups in Ethiopia to a camp at Haro Qallo, a ridge above Negelle town. The meeting convened to hear and discuss the results of research commissioned by our project into livelihoods in neighbouring Somali Region. The research, led by Stephen Devereux of the Institute of Development Studies, had surprised Somali people across that region, because it was, they said, an accurate presentation of their lives. Presenting it to the Oromo was a way of stimulating further debate.

'At Haro Qallo,' resumed Nura, 'there was an understanding which was established that we have a big problem with land issues. Because we had this in the back of our mind, the meeting provided a platform, based on the Somali experience, to now focus on that problem and talk about it. So we took the opportunity. There was nothing to block us from thinking about it. We looked at the issue of who is supposed to do something about it. We know who is suffering, we know who is affected by it, but who is supposed to do something about it? So we went into the discussion and debates and also we did deeper analysis, referring to the original agenda of Yaballo and the decision that we should take opportunity at any time to discuss the things we need to do for ourselves. So we approached it by looking at weaknesses in each institution in terms of how this problem came to be: weakness in government, and weakness in our customary institutions.'

'There were failures on our part. We have a very elaborate legal system. We stopped using that when we started listening to others. We tried to pilot crop farming and work it out. And as we tried that, the farms started to

expand. As the crops expanded and started threatening the place, people started enclosing land, which is more or less like farming, but it's for pasture this time. People started using the common community land that animals need to survive. We are responsible for that. We were weak on that because we were not consciously doing it, we were each one responding to the situation.

'There were two things that happened at Haro Qallo. We told the government that it was our meeting and we are the ones who invited them. And that was seen to be acceptable, so we learned something, that we can actually call government to a meeting. We have always been following their instructions. But now we invited them, they came. We asked them to speak, they spoke. We asked them to listen, they listened. It gave us a new understanding – a new knowledge – that this thing can happen.

'On the land questions we asked, is there hope in doing something about it? We said yes. Is it easy? We said no. Who is going to do it? We'll do it ourselves. We encourage each other to do that. And we asked, which frame are we going to use? We will use our institutions and our knowledge. We decided to ignore all new knowledge and all new institutions until we get to a level where we can't move. At one stage we are going to need new knowledge to come and help us open up, that's when we will ask for new ideas to come in. This is what we are working on. We took responsibility.

'We contracted on one thing with senior government officials. One thing we agreed is that we will never hold them responsible for things we have not complained about, even if government does wrong. We took that responsibility and they contracted us on that. They also took responsibility for one thing and we contracted them, the fact that if we want to do something and the policy is silent and we do a good thing, the government will not stop us doing it. It is what we agreed at Hara Qallo. This is what all of us took back home. We took it wide, far, to pastoralist areas for people to understand what had happened at Hara Qallo. ...The beginning of my feeling of good started in Hara Qallo, because I think of not only attendance of government but the response of government was also very good.'

Compare what Nura is saying about the government participation at Hara Qallo and the story from Yaballo in 2004. The atmosphere has completely changed. I was at the first day of the Hara Qallo meeting and I heard the Regional Minister for Education speak to the elders as if they were true constituents of his polity. Some government officials at least were being drawn into the circles of understanding that the pastoralist leaders were convening.

In December 2007, we invited more than 500 Somali pastoralist leaders from Ethiopia and neighbouring countries to a gathering at a place called Hudet. Another fine camp, this time the tented villages were strung along the edges of a dry river under tamarind and acacia trees. The women had their own camp at one end, the members of parliament, official visitors and journalists at the other. In between lay the geography of interconnecting

villages representing every clan in Somali and their neighbours the Oromo and Afar. When the pastoralists arrived there was only one thing people wanted to talk about. Peace.

Nura says, 'for the first time, I think, there was an understanding established that the Oromo and Somali can sort things out together. They can relate to each other well. They can also share issues. This was one of the understandings established at Hudet. Of course, Hudet was not only about knowledge between Oromo and Somali, but between the Somali themselves. I met people there who had met other Somali clans for the first time.'

'There was a lot of discussion about land conflict. And there was one understanding which was reached, that this problem will not be solved by complaining, unless pastoralists do something using their own law and their own knowledge. I think many people left the meeting happy. It appears, from the stories that I have heard, that it was a memorable gathering for the Somali community. From day one to the end, I think there was a lot of understanding.'

'Since Hudet I have been in contact with the elders of Somali. We call each other, they call me, I call them. We meet, we chat. We exchange ideas, we discuss problems. We consult each other, advise each other. We plan together. So we are truthful with each other. Some things we can do nothing about, we also share with each other. This discussion and calling has not been there before. It's a new thing. This is what came out of Hudet.'

It is late afternoon. The sun has cooled and the rush hour traffic has built up on the highway. I draw in the threads of what I have heard and — did I give the threads back to Nura as I should have done? I hope so. My notebook says that at the end of the Yaballo meeting there was an understanding, a spark of an idea that pastoralists need not wait for something to change in hitherto untouchable spheres. After Yaballo there was a weaving of debates and conversations through the structures of society in the meetings that usually discuss welfare and production and in the peace meetings that the elders organised, and the understanding grew and spread. At Qarsa Dambi, the Oromia pastoralists heard descriptions of people and places that they recognised and yet who did things differently and they 'expanded their edge'. Then the behaviour of the government officials at Hara Qallo and at the peace meetings showed that some of them had joined the conversation too. Contrast that with the dismissive, rattled response of the administrators at Yaballo three years before. Then the Somalis took a step into the same conversation. They spoke to each other about peace in a region where conflict, blame and betrayal is a daily reality. I believe that they thought things then, however briefly, that they hadn't imagined were possible.

## Connections and networks

It is now possible to add a spatial and multiple element to my previously more temporal and one-to-one view of understanding. Understanding travelled and developed, not only from a tradition into the present and future, but also across space and between people. This means that the projective element of understanding is multiplied as people move and talk. Might the understanding have distorted into the unreal, as in the idea of Chinese whispers? As multiple people in a variety of different places took up the matter of the discussion, the topic itself became better connected to the people and the places of the debate. In this case (and it is not always the case) the clear single topic of all these conversations, the understanding of which was brought forward from each person as they joined into the conversation, magnified the subject until it became more concrete, commonplace and evident. The idea of pastoralists doing things for themselves (beyond the usual range of things they did for themselves and re-occupying terrains of action that had been taken over by the State) now became a possibility. It was an idea that had at one time been unthinkable.

The debate is alive again, as Borbor said. It travels across the country from one person to another, from one meeting to another, along roads and goat paths, in messages and across the phone network. The subject is the people themselves and their own understanding of who they are and what they can do and be. The tradition is brought forward again and again, deliberately in their stories and inadvertently in the language that each person uses. But in bringing it forward in discussion with one another, they are making the world anew. They are re-describing, as Rorty might put it (Rorty 1989). I had no idea it would happen like this. This form of re-description mirrors the development of language and history. It is one that can only happen in a multiplicity of voices in a series of encounters. By relying on the conversations of many, rather than only those of the elite, re-description lays the ground for the cliché of the future. Now, there, it is something new. I see that all the different people in this story conversing and debating, pondering and plotting, and all the different places where the discussions happened, and all the new artefacts and institutions that were inextricably affixed to the conversation – the trees, the money, the politics – are having their own

multiple effects on what travels forward as understanding. It demonstrates that coming to understanding is a function of all of life co-operating at once.

Nura, I believe, made a substantial contribution to phenomenological inquiry into understanding in his explanation on that day. He pointed to the aspects of understanding that arise with others in conversations between many different kinds of people across large areas of space and over time. He gave a new connective dimension to the character of event that is common to all understanding. The qualities of mobility, communality and oral expression of pastoralist people may well have had a bearing on why it was clear to him that understanding arises in its travel across people, time and space. He offered me an aspect of understanding that I had not yet found in the literature. This event of understanding illustrates again that in the coming together of different people, with their different systems of meaning, different cultures, different ways of articulating the world and holding it together –and where there is openness– new understandings have the potential to arise.

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## Chapter 9 – Concluding Remarks

Considering understanding as a phenomenon, I have interpreted it as it has presented itself to me in my own experience. I saw that I come to understandings with others, never alone. Our diverse histories and cultures anticipate meaning and provoke questions in each other, from which arise not misunderstandings or understandings, but different kinds of understanding. Theory and presupposition give my understanding of things an instability that is openness. They seem ready to be refuted and in time, they are.

In this final chapter I review the explorations of this inquiry. The first section considers the foundations of understanding as consciousness. The second provides a summarised articulation of understanding in terms of history, distance and dialogue. The third looks briefly at some of the arenas in which understanding is always operating and yet is often unrecognised; and the final section considers the ramifications of this work.

### ***Foundations***

My conception of understanding rests on the notion of consciousness as being 'outside' the self and 'alongside' the world and the other, given to me by Martin Heidegger (BT 89). From consciousness of Being comes *consciousness as understanding*, nourished by historicity, projection and care. Gadamer's hermeneutic themes of historicity and prejudice, provocation and wholeness, openness, fusion of horizons and agreement provide then a set of open questions which I interpret in concrete examples of my own. Other philosophers and thinkers working on understanding from practical, ethical, political and ecological perspectives, including Warnke, Goodman, Elgin, Cheney, Weston, Chabal, Abram, Sarris and unpublished philosophers I met in East Africa, echo and enrich the idea of interpretive agreement with notions of *consideration*, *meaning* and *matter*. European writers Arendt, Habermas, Foucault and Weber give me

insights into aspects of my own cultural history, while African writers like Achebe and Okri give me a view of a different world.

Consciousness comes into the foreground. Even at its most quiescent, it has form (Cheney 1998:274). Its fundamental nature is to differentiate and unify: *this is, this is not; it is so* (TM 252). Different consciousnesses arise of different cultures and modes of attention. Western development consciousness, for example, born of a history of colonial and missionary intervention, gives us distinctions of developed and under-developed, rich and poor, modern and traditional, by which we see ourselves as dividing up and *acting on* the world. What might be termed ‘pastoralist consciousness’, born of existence within a particular ecology and history, gives them distinctions of mobile and immobile, capable and incapable, truth and lies, by which they co-operate with the world. Hermeneutic consciousness, I learned, brings forward distinctions of parts and whole, and history and encounter, and it also emphasises fusion and belonging. This emphasis transforms differentiation from a divisive, cutting notion to a notion of articulacy, entirety and dynamism. These three consciousnesses – developmental, pastoralist and hermeneutic are all forms of understanding, capable of merging with one another and with other consciousnesses, while retaining their distinctive histories. What makes hermeneutic consciousness special is that it is consciousness of understanding itself.

## ***Articulating understanding***

### **History**

In the foregoing chapters I have considered understanding from various angles. I started in chapter 3 with the fundamental and irreducible influence of history on all of us. I have explored how prejudice, which Gadamer rehabilitated as the ground for new understanding, is profoundly historical. This state of being flung into history and always expressing and expanding it, is manifest in the ever differentiating and fusing variety of cultural horizons. The tradition of any



concept defines the parameters of its current meaning and what is offered for re-evaluation in the face of the challenges of encounter.

Historicity for us is expressed in language. Thought is language, language expresses the world, and it reaches from the past into the future as it is spoken, played or gestured. It is in constant state of renewal, not in a straightjacket, but on a launch-pad. We are always speaking with another from our tradition. The kind of interpretation that remains true to the thing itself, adding new aspects and shedding obsolete opinions, is not about perfect words and abstracted explanations; rather it is about perfect communication. Language speaks the achievement and disasters of all our cultures. It is the understandings we open for each other when we are clear about things, know the limits of our knowledge and communicate. History is always present and productive. It has a depth of effect and a breadth of potential.

## **Distance**

In the second phase of my inquiry, in chapters 4 and 5, I looked at the problematic of understanding as it is manifest in incomprehension, fearful concern and abstraction. Many people have a sense that our world is fragmented. This sense is made possible by a consciousness that stresses division and category, separation and the possibility of domination. Yet looking closely at my experience I note that my consciousness was also constantly assailed by connection across distance and the claims made on me by the things and people I encountered. Connection was not always benign. I experienced the kinds of connection that suppressed new understandings; the vague everyday that blanketed me from too much thinking and the kinds of connection that generated so much agreement for some that it alienated others.

I explored how strangeness and distance generated cruelty and indifference, while paradoxically offering the potential for surprise and innovation. I saw how easy it is to turn away from the apparent irrelevance of the strange and distasteful. In my own profession I clarified that I felt no real responsibility for the other, because I held it at a distance in order to manipulate it. But I also noted that

distance and strangeness were already offering the possibility of connection. I was provoked by strangeness and even by insult and it brought forward questions. I had to understand how you could have ideas so different from mine – could I encompass your ideas and mine together? Distance proves to be productive. Human finitude and its expression in culture prove to be the ground of creativity and agreement.

## **Dialogue**

I then considered the way understanding arises in conversation between you and me; between me, other people and things. The fundamental and relentless structure of question and answer found its expression in dialogue in which new aspects of the concrete reality that I sought to be ready for were constantly proffered. I find that conversations are driven less by the people in them than by the things under discussion. The more focused they are, the more productive the conversation. The more surprising the remark, the greater the possibility that what has been self-evident to me (hidden from my view), will be called forward to be enhanced or amended. I apply what I hear to what I have provisionally concluded and I respond, thus am I and you bound together and to the thing we are talking about.

With the help of the African pastoralists, for whom understanding is as important as it is for me, but who construe it from an entirely different history of thought, I saw new aspects of understanding that I had not previously appreciated. What had, at the early stages of my research, appeared to be a comportment of each individual being, became a comportment of entire societies and cultures. The thing talked of, embodied in the spoken word, travelled across people, time and space in restless inquiry. From women in tea shops, through researchers in hotels, through elders deliberating on justice, through officials wanting to administer it all, through young people thinking about the future, the conversation flowed inexorably on. I learned that while understanding is always prior to conversation, making it possible, it also nourishes itself on conversation.

## **The play of the three**

Now I am I looking at all three together: history, geography and society, in play with one another, always active. I note that each culture has its own way of holding the world together built of its recognition and appreciation of the interplay of these three in their language, culture and institutions. Borana pastoralists move across the land to important places: *'here are rain, prosperity and peace,'* they chant. They sit in their shades and make judgments on practical things. Europeans send representatives to parliament, have police forces and go to churches, mosques, temples and festivals. Each is an expression of how we act on our understandings arising from history, distance and dialogue. We all have ways of celebrating which tie us together (Esteva and Prakash 1998). Each culture knits together the consciousness-broken bones of reality, wrapping and healing them in their own historically effected conversations.

## ***Application***

As a development professional based in Ethiopia I have been party to seemingly endless reiterations of incomprehension. I have had a role in plenty and famine, peace and war, probity and corruption. My understanding of what we were talking about, agreeing, investing in and doing was coloured by my own perspectives on the impressive scale of patronage, cruelty and resistance that I witnessed and was part of.

Although it is tempting to use this experience to suggest how we can be better at reaching understanding in similar circumstances, creating an ideal approach, I instead have considered simply what is happening. My application of philosophical ideas, where political suspicions are acute and notions of superiority are strong, yields detail as to how understanding occurs – at least in one life and its connected lives.

I conclude that I have come to understandings with others in the fluid process of conversation, where we see ourselves mirrored, and enriched, in what we encounter. We are interpreting ourselves and the world as historically affected

beings; as communities and cultures in engagement. This notion of how understanding arises has been almost totally ignored in my profession. Recognising it could have implications for comprehending how people relate to each other across enormous divides of wealth, identity, tradition and power.

My investigation has shown how easy it is to contribute to exploitation, cruelty and despair. I asked at the beginning of this thesis whether there was a link between disrespect and misunderstanding. It may have sounded naïve to connect something as nasty as cruelty with something as apparently bland as understanding. But, as I hope I have demonstrated, understanding is by no means bland. Understanding is powerful and fundamental stuff. It is how people are with other people and the world. It is not something that belongs to one person, but to entire communities (of whatever sort). It is a tireless traveller, forever questing ahead of where it is now for new ways of understanding. In my experience where people increase the clarity of their understandings with one another, whoever they are, they demand respect and get it. Understanding is not something bestowed, like empathy, or charity, but what underlies the state of respect.

Violence to people and nature is a terrible canker. While there are a few encouraging signs in the environmental field, there is not much evidence to show that violent conflict is going to decline. The ways in which people put violence to rest, keep it at bay, are based on an application of intelligence across a whole range of social, economic, spiritual, environmental and political fields. It is a situation in which understandings are fundamental and in which respect plays a crucial role. In the sciences, too, understanding is always at play. Wisdom is always working alongside technology, although its role is not always recognised. The crisis of confidence in modern science, multinational business and the global economy in the light of climate change and economic turbulence is creating big debates which call for clear understanding not only of the things themselves, but of the kinds of consciousness that underlie our contributions to the situation.

Within my own sector, the development profession, many would argue that there is a major problem (Duffield 2005; Moyo 2009). In my experience in East Africa I

can hazard that conditions for the majority of poor people for most of the time are getting worse. Meanwhile, the development profession does not have to account fully to anyone for the pitiful results of its good intentions and fixed understandings. Development consciousness, which I earlier defined as involving bringing the unruly into line, has much to answer for, because it fails to accept that consciousness must be and always is open to the possibility that the other could be right.

In all these arenas hermeneutics is a consciousness of how we live together and is a foundation for the art of coming to agreements. Wisdom continues to make its contribution to the lives we all live today, even as it is denigrated as old fashioned and no longer necessary in our rationalised world. It is not a vestige of antiquity, but a fundamental aspect of existence. In every arena it is there, although not recognised as wisdom; instead it is called experience, understanding or capability. It is how each being senses what is there, what is fitting, what it is to communicate, and in what way and when to act.

## ***Ramifications***

### **Art of agreement**

In the first chapter I asked whether there is an art of agreement and whether such an art can be enhanced. I conclude that there is an art of agreement, but I now understand that an art is as much technique, as it is practice, as it is consciousness. What this thesis has taught me is that the starting point is consciousness, from which practice arises, from which an art comes into being.

Art has an element of method, but it is also crucially beyond it. I found no evidence on my journey for any concrete conditions that could always be put into place to enhance understanding. If I had a hermeneutic consciousness born of experience, then I would have something like Aristotle's moral capability. This capability arises mainly, I think, in a comportment that opens conditions for fitting action in me and others. The art of agreement is not a way of manipulating—it is openness to an experience of something that asserts itself as

true. For my purposes in development it is when I bring clarity and coherence into play with attention and conversation.

## **Research**

It is, I think, reasonable to suggest that phenomenological research makes a contribution to an art of agreement—it raises hermeneutic consciousness. As I said in chapter 1, when the subject matter is development, the hermeneutic implication is to consider the things, people and institutions themselves in multiple aspects, while also noting where we get our truths from and how we negotiate and account for them. When research connects traditions, pays attention to the history of assumptions and is scrupulously clear about the things of its concern, it enhances hermeneutic consciousness in the practice of it. When research is properly and repeatedly challenged by different cultures, it foregrounds and expands its presuppositions. Its abstractions are called to account. When it is called back to the lifeworld of those who are researched, it provokes the dynamic conversations that nourish understanding.

## **Beyond exploitation**

I want, more than anything, for understanding to flourish. Poor people, who number in the billions, have vast capability for coming to understandings with those who do not yet converse with them; those who do not hold them in respect. It is a potential that is unrecognised in development and modernity. The result for many is divisiveness, hopelessness and anger.

One of the chief criticisms of Gadamer has been his rehabilitation of prejudice and his emphasis on tradition. Critics argue that tradition belongs mainly to the winners who define ideology to their own benefit and to the detriment of the losers: the poor, the minorities and the weak. Tradition, some say, belongs to the police state, the rapists and the tyrants (John Caputo cited in Marshall 2004). But Gadamer is neither for nor against tradition; he only points out that it is a condition of our being ready for the future. It is true that discrimination and violence lead as often to silence as to productive conversation. But this truth does not provide an argument against what Gadamer has understood. Any

emancipatory efforts will always be grounded in an understanding arising from tradition.

Even if tradition does harbour the interests of the wealthy and powerful—and such people are often unashamed appreciators of it—it also is a great leveller. The hermeneutic attitude is accessible to anyone who comes across it who is willing to give it attention. This I learned from some of the pastoralists I spoke to, many of whom have a hermeneutic attitude of their own, and who speak with crystalline clarity much of the time.

Even though there turns out to be no method of understanding, in turning attention to understanding and in stumbling over and eventually assimilating a hermeneutic consciousness, a certain power begins to accrue. It is a power with language—not an educated language of curly phrases, jargon and long words—but a possibility of listening and speaking clearly and coherently about things. Clarity is attractive. It allows people to agree things with other people and means they can collaborate. It gives them the capabilities to create the freedoms and connections that Amartya Sen suggests make up development. What Gadamer does for me is clarify the importance of speaking the world; not hardening it to a terminology, but giving hearing always to the other and to oneself. What we have lost in our development world, or perhaps never properly had, is an ability to converse.

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